

THE FACE IN THE POOL

A FAERIE TALE



By
J. ALLEN · ST. JOHN



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THE FACE IN THE POOL
A FAERIE TALE



The Princess Astrella

THE FACE IN THE POOL

A FAERIE TALE

PICTURES AND TEXT

by

J · ALLEN · ST · JOHN ·



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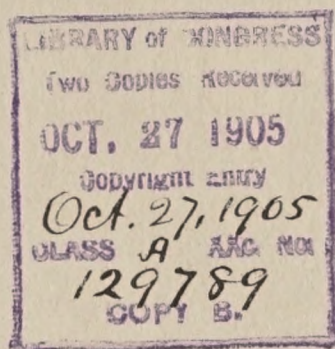
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To
ELLK an
American Prin-
-cess: this book
is
Dedicated





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THE FACE IN THE POOL

CHAPTER

I



In which the Princess.
makes an Enemy at her
first Reception.

CHAPTER THE FIRST

*In which the Princess makes an Enemy at her
first Reception*



THE FACE IN THE POOL



THE LORD HIGH SECRETARY of Elgardane sat at a huge oval table in the centre of a quaint, oak-panelled chamber. Before him spread a drift of snowy parchment, with envelopes, seals, wax, and tapers in heaped profusion. Wiping his quill pen with care upon his inky coat-sleeve, he tickled his nose with its feather, sneezing ecstatically, — a habit cheaper than snuff, and serving on the present occasion to pass the time while Her Majesty was getting her thoughts in order.

Without, there reigned the drowsy quiet of a Summer day; the only sounds to break the stillness of the room the distant twittering of birds and the fussy humming of a blundering bee that, having drifted in along the bar of sunlight streaming through the high and narrow window, now circled the walls, butting at the ceiling, anxious to be gone once more, out where the flowers held each its brimming honey cup, yet quite confused as to the way.

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Finding the eye of the Queen upon him, he coughed gently. "May it please Your Majesty, I have finished directing the invitations to the Princess's christening. Is Your Highness sure no one of the fairy guardians has been forgotten?"

"Quite," replied the Queen, twiddling her thumbs complacently. "We have overlooked none, as has been the mistake of some of my ancestors, with what sad results we all know. My child, thanks to her mother's foresight, shall have no witch's curse to mar her happiness and dim the good gifts I am assured her fairy relatives will shower on her."

And thus it was the wicked witch Eluesa made a quaint black spot among the gay colors of the fairies who came for the royal ceremony, drawn through the air by bright-hued birds, or up from the sea in shallops of pearly shells, with dolphins and sea-horses glittering in silver harness, — the witch on her magic broomstick, her great black cat in her arms.

The Princess, meanwhile, quite unaware both of the noble company and of the honors about to be hers, slept peacefully in her royal crib, while the fairies considered as to her name. This threatened to take some time, as one was for this, the other for that, while they gathered so close in their eagerness

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about the little sleeper that, wakened at last by their voices, she opened her big bright eyes.

“Call her Astrella, the Star-eyed,” said the smallest of the fairies, in a shrill, piping voice, and the rest cried joyful assent. Even the baby Princess herself seemed pleased, for she cooed in glee, and reaching out a tiny hand to the tail of the black cat the witch still held in her arms, pulled it with might and main. The old dame was at first annoyed; the cat’s claws were exceedingly sharp, and it had planted them violently, but the gleam of malicious joy came into the witch’s eye as she thought of a way to make the accident an excuse for causing trouble. She had long been accustomed to being left out when the guests were invited to christenings, and therefore took pleasure in arriving after the good fairies had made their gifts, and spoiling all with her black art. She was worried when invited to this one, as she had then no excuse for mischief. Here was her chance, and quickly taking advantage of it, she drummed with her red-heeled shoes on the floor and cried in a hoarse, cracked voice, as she pulled a tiny silver spinning-wheel from under her cloak:

“This is my gift, and it will grow as she grows. If she prove fonder of spinning than of play, all will be well; but if not, I shall return when she is sixteen, and then—,” the

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last word ending with a menacing scream as she mounted her broom and sailed away out of the window.

Great was the sorrow and dismay of the King and his Queen, who had planned all so carefully for the happiness of their child, notwithstanding all that the fairies could do or say, and all the gifts of beauty, gentleness, and grace that they freely bestowed. Who could tell if the Princess would prove industrious? — for diligence was the one gift the fairies could not bestow upon her.

The Queen Fairy promised to do all in her power should misfortune befall. “We can do no more at present,” said she. Then they sadly vanished, one by one. The baby held up her dimpled hand to her mother’s cheek and cooed gleefully. A tear stood in the King’s eye.

“We must do all we can to save her, — to make her love to work,” he sighed.

“But how can she stoop to work?” said the Queen. “Think of the family traditions. What a disgrace!”

CHAPTER II



Tells · how · a · Speck · of · Gold ·
came · to · shine · in · a · Tower ·
Window · where · no · Tower · was ·
before ·

CHAPTER THE SECOND

*Tells how a Speck of Gold came to shine in a
Tower Window, where no Tower was before*





IFTEEN YEARS HAD

come and gone, and the sixteenth was to dawn on the morrow, since the Princess Astrella had come to gladden the hearts and eyes of the people of Elgardane. She had grown a most beautiful maid; in all the kingdom none could

compare with Star-eyes, as her playmates called her. Her hair, of a rich copper-gold, hanging nearly to her feet, was braided with strings of coral and amethyst. A gown of peacock blue-green, trimmed with scarlet and worked with a pattern in golden threads, clung to her lovely form, while a dainty foot in scarlet slipper just peeped from beneath. The richness of her dress but made a proper setting for her lovely face, and that in its turn for her eyes, rich and beautiful as pansies on a dewy morning, clear as the lake that was formed from the pure, limpid rills in the mountain hard by, yet bright as the queen star of a Summer night. Truly, the little fairy with the piping voice had named her well, the Star-eyed.

Just now these eyes were filled with tears. She was thinking of the morrow, and her sixteenth birthday. She knew

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well the story of the witch and what she had screamed as she flew through the palace window ; for, though the King and Queen had come to think the witch would not carry out her threat, now that the girl had grown so lovely and gracious, worshipped by all who knew her, still the presence of the spinning-wheel — only three inches high when the witch first laid it before her, and which had grown apace with her, till now it was of the same size as the one Grisela her maid was always working at — made her very anxious.

Now, truth to tell, though Astrella was beautiful, she seldom was busy. She had tried so hard to be, but always before she had spun the wheel a dozen times or wound a yard of thread something would happen to call her away. Her pony would whinny from the courtyard below, to beg for their morning gallop ; the plash of the fountain called her to linger in the shade of the fine old trees by its brink, to feed with her cake the gold-fish flashing their brilliant scales quite out of the water in their eagerness for crumbs ; or her gay little spaniel Rex, chasing the butterflies, would invite her with joyous barks to join the merry frolic. These and a hundred other sights and sounds would call her from the wheel with its fussy hum and the thread that hurt her rosy fingers.

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Had she but thought to try another wheel, all would have been well ; for she was far from being a lazy girl. It was all the fault of the wheel. The witch had taken care to enchant it, so that even Grisela, who made her own to spin so smoothly and with such pleasure in her task, would have had to leave it and go a-larking just as the Princess did, had she tried the witch's gift. And then the wheel was so pretty, all of pale shining silver, who that possessed such a beautiful one would have thought of using a common thing of wood and iron ? But Astrella knew nothing of this as she sat by the edge of the fountain, tossing her cake crumb by crumb to the greedy fish and watching the sun as it dropped like a red-gold ball over the crest of the mountain near by.

When the sun rose again, scattering the golden clouds in the east, the courtyard was full of her friends of the palace, and many who had come from a distance to stand before her window and wake her with songs and gladness to her birthday revels. But the music ceased and a low groan went up as the lattice opened ; for, not the fair face of their Star-eyes, but the malicious grinning countenance of the wicked witch looked down upon them.

“Look !” she cried, pointing to the mountain. They gazed in the direction indicated by her bony finger, and were

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amazed to see that where the velvet grass and lovely trees had shone like precious emeralds on its sides, the mountain was now clothed in a dense black forest, with a small clear space at the summit, on which stood a tower of gray stone, with only one window near the top, in which something shone like gold in the level rays of the morning sun. "Aye, gaze your fill," laughed the wicked old woman fiercely; "she was a lazy wench, though she was so fine, and so she belongs to me till a prince can be found who can perform the three tasks and pass the enchanted wood."

As the witch cried out these words she chuckled shrilly, then leering at the grief-stricken King and Queen, who were among those that had gathered to welcome their Star-eyes, she seemed to grow thin, and wavered like a blue flame in the breeze. . . . They looked again, to find her gone; nothing but the open lattice left to tell the tale, while the speck of gleaming gold in the tower window still shone in the sunlight. They knew now the meaning of it. It was the Princess Astrella's copper-gold hair.

CHAPTER II



In which Prince Hardel
goes hunting a White Stag
only to find something better.

CHAPTER THE THIRD

*In which Prince Hardel goes hunting a White
Stag, only to find something better*





DEEP IN THE FOREST OF Garsamane, ten leagues or more from the fair city of Pellam, where were the palace and court of King Halborn the Just, stood the hunting lodge of his only son and heir, the Crown Prince Hardel, a gallant youth, fond of all manly sports. The first in the hunt, the best shot with long or cross-bow in all the kingdom, none could excel him at sword practice or with lance and buckler in the tourney. Many were the bright eyes that beamed on him there, for of all the beauties at his father's court not one but would have been proud had he worn her colors in the joust. But as yet no maiden's veil had graced his helm, for of all this he cared not a jot. When lessons were done with, it was away for the merry greenwood to the lilt of the huntsman's horn, and over field and fell after the startled deer or wily fox, with music of fast-flying hoofs, and the wild, sweet air in his nostrils. As the first peep of sunshine filtered through the leaves, changing the purple-gray forest to a mass of dancing green and gold, waking the myriad birds from the

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drowse of the Summer night, and shining through the quaint leaded panes of the hunting lodge, the Prince sprang from his couch, and, throwing wide his casement, hailed the fair promise of a perfect day. He was longing to be in the saddle again; all of yesterday he and his merry company had raced through brake and brier, with baying hounds and panting steeds, after a strange white stag that had seemed to rise like a puff of snow from the very ground before the dogs — now almost theirs, now distancing the swiftest. At last, when the day was nearly done, and horse and hunter were full weary, he had, with a mighty burst of speed, vanished deep into the shadow of the wood. Hardel had determined to follow the stag again to-day, and should they catch another sight of him, to separate from the hunting party, hoping by making a wide circle into the wood to get a shot with his cross-bow, should the deer double on his track.

It was not long before the gay cavalcade, jingling through the early dew, saw just before them, as on the previous day, the great white form of the splendid stag rise, seemingly from the very ground, and, with a shake of his spreading antlers, lead the mad chase. The Prince, as soon as he saw all eyes upon the quarry, slipped, as he had planned, from the throng, and making a wide circuit, came to a giant oak standing apart



In place of the frog there stood a tiny manikin

(Page 29)

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in a mossy glen, at its foot a pool of clear and sparkling water.

“Here,” said he, “I will wait; for should the stag come this way, doubtless he will stop to drink, while behind this great trunk I can lie concealed. But first to slake my own thirst.”

Stepping to the edge of the pool, he was about to kneel, when his eye fell on a great frog gazing solemnly at him from a rock half buried in the water. Stooping, he picked up a stone, intending to kill the creature, but as he poised it to throw, he noted how like jewels the little eyes shone, the broad green bands and stripes on its back forming a rich design. He dropped his pebble, saying, “Live on, old Emerald-coat. You and I have no quarrel. Sun yourself the livelong day and croak your songs at night. So may you be happy in your way.” Then taking up a handful of water, he threw that instead.

No sooner had it touched the frog than in its place there stood a tiny manikin, not two feet high, his twinkling eyes beaming on the Prince from out a puckered little face. Round of girth was he, but thin in the arms, with spindling legs cased in scarlet tights, his coat all green and yellow, his cap made with a peak so long and slender it hung far over

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down his back ; his hands and feet, large as those of an ordinary man, looking queer at the ends of such slender limbs, while a long white beard added a touch of dignity to an otherwise wholly comical appearance.

“Hail, Prince Hardel !” he cried in a high-pitched voice, that sounded very like the music-box the Prince had received on his last birthday ; then, hopping nimbly from the rock to shore, he held out his hand in friendly greeting. “I’ve been enchanted, you know,” he said apologetically, noting the Prince’s surprise. “A long time ago I prevented the witch Eluesa from performing one of her wicked tricks. She never forgave my interference, and, catching me off my guard, here by the pool, about two weeks ago, she changed me into the frog you saw, before I could say the counter-charm that would have saved me. And here I had to stay till some human being would spare my life and throw the water over me instead. The charm has been broken sooner than I could have hoped, thanks to you, my Prince. But that’s enough about myself.” Stopping suddenly and looking up at Hardel, with a quizzical smile, he continued in his tinkling voice, “What can I do for you in return ?”

One would travel many a straight mile and many a crooked one, too, I’m thinking, ere he found one whom

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such a question would puzzle; yet puzzle the Prince it did. The only thing he could think of was the white stag he had been hunting, still he did not like to ask that. It would have been unsportsmanlike. He had always had everything that a prince could want. He could think of nothing, and said so — adding kindly that his having been, all unconsciously, the instrument in freeing the little man from his plight had added enough to his happiness to make further gift from him unnecessary.

“Not so,” said the gnome; then, stooping, he picked a smooth round pebble from the ground and tossed it into the pool. It must have been a queer stone, for instead of the ever-widening rings the Prince had often seen form when he threw stones into the water, he now saw the whole pool boiling like a caldron over the fire, while huge bubbles rose to the surface, exploding with a faint popping noise, and soon there emerged a small white hand bearing a silver plate on which was a single apricot.

As the manikin took it, the hand disappeared, and all was quiet as before. “Eat this,” said he, presenting the apricot to Har-del, as though nothing unusual had occurred. “It will help you to win your heart’s desire, though as yet you know not what that is.”

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The Prince took a bite of the dainty fruit and turned to speak to him, to see the manikin's figure growing transparent and wavering as vapors waver in the air on a very hot day. Even as he looked the colors of the gnome's dress — green, gold, and scarlet — seemed to melt into the background of leaves and sumach berries. He was gone.

"A queer little fellow, that," muttered the Prince to himself; then finishing the apricot, which was very refreshing, a feeling of drowsiness came over him, and he stretched himself in the shade of the oak and fell to watching the creamy clouds sail lazily across the Summer sky.

He was about to drop into a gentle doze when something happened that put him wide awake in an instant. An acorn dropping on his hand, he looked up for the cause, to find that a pair of squirrels had settled for a chat on a limb just over his head. He had often watched such little creatures before, scampering through the branches, but what made him rub his eyes in wonder, thinking he was dreaming, was that he could understand their chatter, and more — they were gossiping about himself. Then he remembered the apricot he had eaten, which had appeared in such a mysterious way, and of having read of the famous trees growing in the underground gardens of the King of the Gnomes, the magic fruit

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of which would give to the fortunate mortal who tasted it the power of understanding the language of birds and animals. And indeed he was right, for the little man in the green and gold jacket was none other than Speeldig, the King of the Gnomes. This priceless gift was his token of gratitude.

CHAPTER IV



Tells·how·the·Princess·
spent·her·first·Day·on·
·the·Mountain·

CHAPTER THE FOURTH

*Tells how the Princess spent her first Day on
the Mountain*





MEANWHILE, THE PRINCESS Astrella, in her tower on the enchanted mountain, was having a rather dull time. When she awoke on her sixteenth birthday, she missed the dainty curtains hanging about her bed, and all the quaint and pretty things that filled her room at home. She realized suddenly what had happened. Running to the casement, she saw far below in the green valley her father's palace, reduced to a mere toy in size by the distance; the crowd of people filling the courtyard and lawn seemed tiny as swarming ants, while a faint cry rose sadly on the morning breeze. It was their mighty shout at the speck of gold in the window — the Princess's copper-gold hair. Then the tiny minarets and the straight lines of her old home grew warped through her tears. Their lovely Princess was only a dear little girl after all, having her first real cry.

When the numbness of her grief had somewhat passed, she began to look for some way out of the tower. The room in which she found herself was by no means bare, but furnished with chairs and table of curious design. A hideous dragon

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patterned in the rug stared up at her, while from the walls quaint figures woven in the tapestry seemed following her with squinting eyes. Old blue-gray china and queerly shaped glassware stood on a sideboard in one corner, while round a wide chimney-place hung copper pots and shining pans.

She had barely glanced at these things and was continuing her search for the door, when a loud tap startled her, and turning quickly she saw the witch Eluesa leaning on her broomstick in the centre of the room, her green eyes shining with malicious joy.

“So pretty Star-eyes has come to stay with her loving godmother at last,” she croaked. “And how does she like her new home? To be sure, you’ve not been here long enough to answer yet, but that’s a thing time will remedy. Every morning on opening the little cupboard you’ll find your dinner in it, but you must cook it yourself in the pretty shining pots, then wash your own dishes, and scrub your own floor. A nice time you’ll have, Lazy-bones!” she cried, suddenly raising her voice to a yell of rage, for the Princess had simply stood looking at her, without word or tear, while she had hoped to see her cry.

“Here you stay,” she continued, shaking her stick, “till a prince comes who can pierce my forest there. By the way,”

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she mocked, with a sudden change of manner, "you were looking for the stairway, weren't you, when I came in? Here it is," and pulling aside one of the tapestries, she revealed a high narrow archway, from which a winding stair led downward. "See what you can make of it. This way to the garden." Suiting the action to the word, she began the descent herself, with a sharp clatter of high red heels as she hopped from step to step, chuckling.

The Princess listened till the last footfall had died away, then sat down to think what next to do. There was the stairway, to be sure, but why had the old dame shown it, she reasoned, unless probably to play some further trick upon her. Still, after listening intently and hearing no sound, she concluded to try it, anyway, and cautiously made her way down. Round and round it turned, dimly lighted by narrow slits cut in the wall of the tower here and there, till, finally, quite dizzy with much circling, the girl saw the half-opened door leading out before her. Hesitatingly, dreading at every step to hear the mocking laugh and be led back again, she approached it, then slipping through, darted into the surrounding wood. Nothing had hindered so far, and faint from the rapid beating of her heart, she leaned panting against a gnarled trunk well within the forest.

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Noticing that unconsciously she had followed a narrow footpath, faintly worn through the moss and partly covered by fallen leaves, she soon found she must keep to it, as everywhere else the brush was thick and full of thorns and brambles that clutched her dress and, twining about her, seemed to bar her way and cling like human hands and arms, forcing her back at every attempt to pass them. She determined to keep on down the path, however, though feeling that her chance of escape was suddenly grown small.

Coming at last to a sharp turn in the way, she saw a sight that caused her to shrink back behind the bushes, for across her path there poured a stream of seething, bubbling pitch, from which thick oily smoke arose, while stretched across the stream — his green and scaly body now half hidden by the vapors, then shimmering dully as some stray beam of sunlight fell upon him from a rift in the dense foliage above — a great dragon lay sleeping. His enormous head, shaped something like that of a crocodile, lay on the farther bank, small jets of bluish flame coming with each breath from his scarlet nostrils. The bat-like wings, growing just back of the shoulders and armed with heavy barbs, were half folded over the back, his spine-covered tail creeping with snake-like curves some way up the bank and nearly to her feet. Watching him closely

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and seeing how soundly he slept, she gradually gained courage, even growing bold enough to touch the huge tail with her foot. Finding he showed no sign, she ventured to stand upon it, then, holding her breath with terror, started cautiously to cross the stream on his broad back. The fumes of the boiling pitch closed thick and smarting around her, nearly choking her, and burning her eyes like pepper, but she kept on, and, soon jumping lightly from the hideous head, was safely hidden in the thicket at the other side. There, finding a tiny pool of clear water, she bent and bathed her feverish eyes in its grateful coolness. Stooping closer to drink, she was astonished at the reflection that met her gaze. Her hair had lost some of its golden hue, her face was thinner, and a few faint wrinkles appeared around her eyes and nose, which seemed to have grown longer. But it could not be helped, she reasoned, and with a sad little sigh, started down the path.

She had not gone far when an enormous rock appeared in the road, completely blocking the way, so smoothly polished as to afford no foothold to climb by ; moreover, it was large as the gardener's cottage that stood at the gate of the palace grounds. She was about to turn back in despair, when she saw, carved deep in its side, this legend: "The Princess

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may pass me, and so may the Prince, if—” and then appeared, as though completing the sentence, three sculptured apples placed in a row. She had barely read it when, to her surprise, the stone commenced sinking gently ; soon she crossed as on level ground, and, turning, saw it had risen again. “The first accommodating thing I’ve met,” she told herself; then, looking at its polished surface that shone mirror-like, she discovered another change in her appearance. Her back had become slightly bent, her hair had quite lost its golden hue, while her whole face and form seemed to have grown older, so that she felt quite frightened and wondered whether they would know her even should she finally succeed in getting out. But thinking she would rather be free without her golden hair than caged in the tower with it, she trudged sturdily along till she came to a tree growing in the very middle of the road, its thick branches curiously gnarled and twisted, sweeping close to earth, barring the way as completely as would a gate. On one of the boughs a large crow sat preening his sable plumage. Seeing Astrella approaching, he picked up a letter that lay beside him, and flapping slowly over her head, dropped it at her feet. Considerably astonished, she saw it was addressed “To the Princess Astrella from her loving godmother, the Queen of the Wood

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Sprites, greeting." "I have succeeded, my dear child," it read, "by the use of all my power, in sending you this warning. The dragon slept, the rock sank into the ground for you to pass, and the tree will raise its branches that you may go by, should you command it. But do not do so. You saw that you changed after passing the stream of boiling pitch, then again after crossing the rock ; but stay on this side of the tree, for if you go beyond you will never regain your beauty, your people will not recognize you as their lovely Princess, so you would fare unhappily all the rest of your life ; which is just what the old witch has planned. Wait here for the Prince, who will surely appear, and go back each night to the tower for food and rest. You will regain your former looks as you pass by the rock and stream on your way back, and lose them again as you come to the tree ; only be patient and wait for your Prince, when all will yet come right. I send you a tiger, one of my trusted servants, to be your playmate and protector. Even the witch will not dare approach you while he is by your side, so you will be spared her evil company, at least. Do not fear him ; he is your friend, and, further, when the princes arrive and try to pass the tree, the rock, and the dragon, do not tell them who you are. Farewell."

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It all happened as the letter had said. She passed over the rock and the dragon's back, no longer afraid, tears of thankfulness in her eyes as she realized she had a friend to help her. She found the tiger waiting for her at the tower door, and flew to him, throwing her arms around his neck and laying her cheek on his silky head, while he loudly purred his greetings. That night she went to bed far happier than she had dared hope to be, and feeling herself safe, her faithful friend and guardian being at the door.

Each day thereafter she sat with the tiger just inside the boundary of the magic tree, and watched the princes who came from far and near trying to cut the branches or climb over or through them; but as fast as some branches were chopped others grew in their places. Obligated to give over in despair, many of the princes reviled her, thinking she was the witch, as they saw her through the boughs, sitting calmly watching them; and some of them, muttering that the Princess was probably not so beautiful as report had it, and hardly worth their trouble, went sulkily away.

But to all she answered not a word, for each time a new prince arrived to try his fortune, she felt that he was not the one, and her heart did not go out to him — otherwise she had spoken, and the tree would have lifted its branches.

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This power was the reward she had earned through her courage in crossing by the dragon's back. She could help her Prince in the first of his tasks, though the rock and the dragon still would confront him. Thus she had a slight chance of choosing her Prince for herself, in a way, which is more than most princesses have.

CHAPTER V



In which the Prince
sees the Face in the Pool.

CHAPTER THE FIFTH

*In which the Prince sees the Face in
the Pool*





HE SQUIRRELS WERE

certainly gossiping, and the Prince was the subject of their chatter. There was no doubt of it; so he lay very quiet, dreading to make the slightest stir that might cause them to scamper beyond his hearing. The one who had just spoken selected an acorn with care, —

as one who had relieved his mind and was willing to take the consequences.

“You do not know him as well as I do,” said his friend, peering over the bough at Hardel, a benevolent twinkle in his bright eye. “He is not at all lazy, as you remarked. He has been hunting, to be sure, which I do not approve of, any more than you,” — with a slight shudder, — “but with the exception of his fondness for the chase, which all our family abhor, he has practically no faults — in my opinion.”

“The queerest thing of all,” replied the first, having finished his acorn and settled himself in a more comfortable position, prepared to enjoy the pleasure of a good digestion and that of conversation as well. “The oddest thing yet

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is that he thinks he is happy. But between you and me, it isn't so ; and, what is more, he won't be till he sees the Princess."

"Upon my word, you astonish me. I thought he cared nothing at all for the fair ones," said his friend, waving a paw in the direction of the palace, with quite the society air. In fact, they both seemed to be members of the upper circle of Squirreldom, and followed so closely the manners of the courtiers that the Prince could scarcely refrain from chuckling aloud.

"Oh, no," replied the other, daintily brushing off a crumb that had lodged on his whisker, and examining his nails with attention. "He is young yet, you know ; besides, I do not refer to any of the court ladies ; the Princess I had in mind is Astrella of Elgardane. Just now she is rather badly off, I fancy, being shut up in a tower on the top of a mountain within sight of her father's palace, — enchanted, of course, as they all are, and waiting for the Prince that can set her free. I believe our Prince there, after seeing her, would make the trial," he continued, musingly. "She is the most beautiful girl you can imagine. I saw her once before she was in the witch's power ; charming, I assure you," and he half closed his eyes in retrospect.

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“But how can he see her, in her present position?” inquired his friend, much interested.

“Oh, nothing easier,” the other returned. “All he need do is to gather a bunch of the crimson berries yonder, squeeze them in the pool, and while their juice dyes the water he can see her, as in a mirror. But come, dear boy, it’s getting quite late. We shall barely be in time to hear the Nightingale, who has promised to sing his latest ‘Ode to the Summer Moon’ for the Bulfinch’s ‘at home.’”

Whereon they both rose, and, with some slight ceremony as to precedence, departed through the leaves.

The Prince lay musing some time after the gossips had gone, scarcely believing his ears; then thinking that maybe the animals might be wiser in some things than were men, he determined to test the virtue of the berries. Rising, he gathered a bunch from the spot the squirrel had indicated to his mate. “There can be no harm in trying,” he said to himself, “and no one is by to laugh if it come to naught.”

Thus turning the matter in his mind, he approached the pool, and squeezing the berries in his hand, watched the purple-crimson juice tint the clear liquid. At first it did nothing more, and he was about to rise, disappointed, when he noticed other colors were forming amid the red, running

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here and there in patterns ever shifting, yet slowly beginning to take permanent form.

He saw through the changing shades the silhouette of a forest that gradually became more distinct, till the branches cut clearly against the sky. The greensward at the feet of the giant trunks took a more brilliant hue; the flowers and stones grew quite plain; and as he knelt, lost in wonder at the sight, the slender form of a maid appeared crossing the open space, a magnificent tiger walking by her side with sinuous grace, proud of the white hand she had laid affectionately on his velvet shoulder. Her supple form, clothed in soft-hued yet brilliant texture, moved with as lithe a freedom as that of her companion, and as she paused, gazing off through the wood, he noted the splendid color of her hair, gleaming rich gold against the gray-purples of the forest shade as a crown would gleam upon its velvet cushion, and thought never had he seen a thing so lovely. As yet he had caught no glimpse of her face, but now she turned her queenly head till she seemed to look directly at him, and he saw the lovely features, clear cut and pure as marble, but lacking its coldness, suffused with soft tones that bathed with creamy color the brows and stately throat, glowing to a delicious rosy pink on her downy cheeks and growing warmer to the hue of

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ripe pomegranate upon her perfect lips. Her eyes held conquering sway above all else; lovely as a fawn's, they seemed to change in color with every pulsing of her heart, — now softest brown, then deepening to royal purple, anon changing to lustrous gray, looking straight into his. So close they appeared, he reached out his hand to her, only to plunge it in the water. A ripple passed over the vision; it wavered as a gauzy veil in the breeze, then, melting to changing bubble tints, was there no more.

Eagerly catching up the remaining berries by his side, he wrung them over the spot where her face had vanished, but they merely crimsoned the crystal water in quite the usual way. The charm would work no more, and Hardel rose with something swiftly heaving in his breast, to seek his horse, grazing near by, with the memory of a vision of two sad velvety eyes before his own.

“The little man was right,” he murmured, as he swung into the saddle. “I did not know my heart's desire. But I am wiser now. To-morrow I start upon my quest, to win her if I may!”

And ever the hoofs of his charger seemed to beat but one refrain: “To win her if I may.”

CHAPTER VI

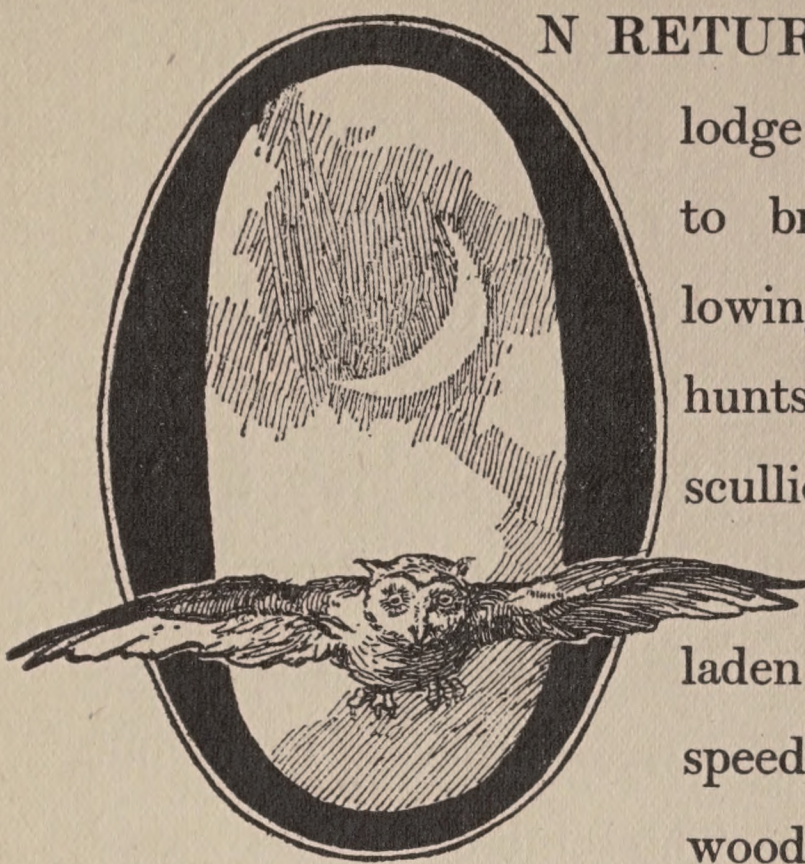


How the Prince returned
to Pellam and of a
Dream he had by the Way.

CHAPTER THE SIXTH

*How the Prince returned to Pellam, and of a
Dream he had by the Way*





N RETURNING TO HIS HUNTING

lodge the Prince at once gave orders to break camp, and by the following morning the long train of huntsmen, falconers, grooms, cooks, scullions, and muleteers, with shout and song urging their heavily laden beasts to the limit of their speed, wended through glade and wooded copse, on the narrow path to Pellam; for the Prince was right anxious to be on his journey, and needed only his father's consent to set forth at once.

Camping that night amid a grove of huge cedars that reared their noble heads above and about the quiet caravan, the Prince could hardly sleep for thinking of the Princess as he had seen her pictured in the pool. As he lay gazing at the stars glowing in the mighty dome that arched the world, he wondered if she, too, from her high-perched tower, could be watching them and the sailing moon ploughing its way through fleecy clouds that, borrowing its light, shone for the moment like royal mantles lined with ermine; anon, through clearer spaces, where the blinking stars retired modestly before

THE FACE IN THE POOL

its glory like courtiers bowing at the passage of their queen. So, streaming with mellow light, the gibbous moon rolled on its way, a fairy boat all silver, in an enchanted sea, to weave strange fancies in Prince Hardel's dreams. When at last he slept, it seemed he stood within a forest glade; around him strange figures leaped amid the gloom of shadowy trunks, weird faces mouthed, and goblins danced fantastic. These fading, there appeared instead a castle bleak against a leaden sky, its gateway guarded by shadowy sentinels. From out its portals came low murmuring. The sombre outlines waved suddenly, then, changing slowly, were transformed to the likeness of a giant, club in hand, his fiery eyes bent on him menacingly. This in its turn gave place to other fantasies. A crowd of maids sat spinning, while before his eyes a flask and sword were brandished high by wrinkled, claw-like hands. Anon, he was a-horse, upon a steed that flew at fearful speed toward something dark and strange that barred the way. Almost he felt the shock of an encounter; then suddenly he found himself in sunny fields, through which a tiny brook ran babbling at his feet. Upon its other side the Princess stood, a smiling welcome in her eyes, her hands outstretched; but as he pressed his horse to leap the stream, lo! it had changed into a furious tor-

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rent, that rolled its waves between, drenching him with icy spray.

So he awoke to find the dawn had come with heavy skies, shedding a chilling rain that numbed him as he rose and sought the shelter of his tent.

All of that day the little company wormed along the narrow mountain roads, till by mid-afternoon the Summer storm had rolled a welcome parting call far to the east. Then the sun, long smothered, peered forth once more to shoot a thousand golden lances at the last few clouds, hurrying on their way to join the disappearing host, like footsore stragglers of a mighty vanguard. It was not long till, cheered by the warming sky, while all nature smiled but the sweeter from its recent tears, they capped the last steep ridge and looked again upon the city of Pellam, spread in the valley at their feet. The red-tiled roofs and creamy stone had been washed fresh and clear; the vale was dotted here and there with the soft greens of clustering yew, or oak and cypress; tall poplars standing sentry at the gates of the palace, which raised its many towers high above all, flashing with the orange light of waning day.

Clattering merrily down, they passed beneath the great arch of the gate just as the warder's cry was echoing

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from its walls. So on with jingling bit and silver-ringing harness, through streets lined with gaping townsfolk crowding to mark the passage of their Prince, up the broad drive to the palace steps, where stood the King to welcome home his son.

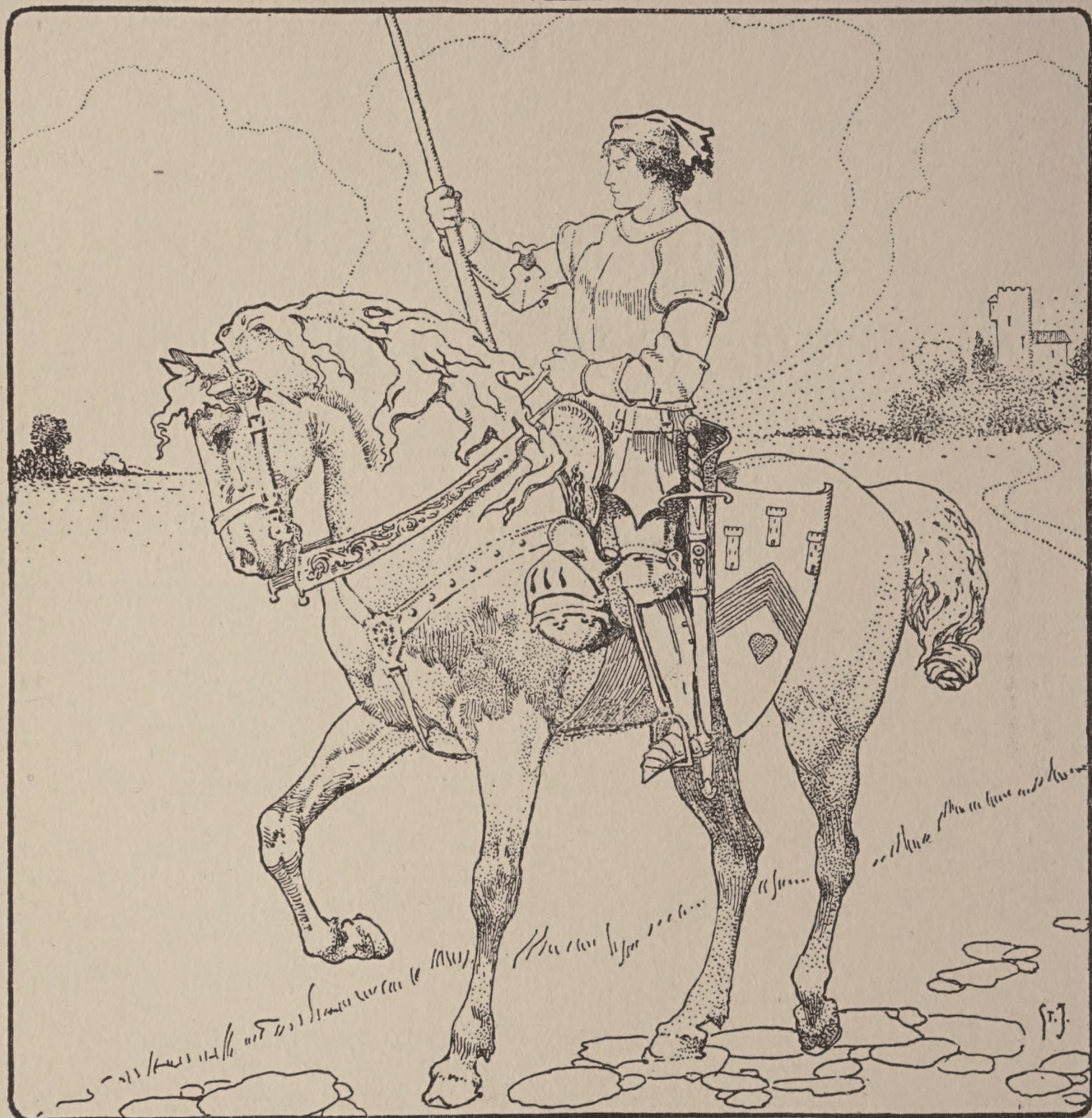
After the feast held to celebrate his safe return, the Prince, alone at last with the King, told him of the strange things that had befallen in the last few days,—of the little man by the pool, of his strange gift and how it had appeared, then of the squirrels' chatter, the vision of his Lady in the berry-dyed water, and last, the weird dream that came the night before. The King was sore anxious, while yet it gladdened him; for it had long been his wish that the Prince should marry, and while he had not spoken of it to him, had hoped the young man would soon find a maid to whom his heart would turn. He knew the high courage of his son, yet dreaded the trials that must beset his path, to win the lady of his dreams; for he could plainly see the fairy folk were mixing in the matter, as they so often did in those old days when knights, with lance in hand, rode out to win their way through unknown lands to meet their hearts' desire. And so it should be now, he murmured to himself, as, looking at the Prince, he thought that seldom had he seen

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so promising an adventurer. No longer the merry boy he had appeared till then, — a lad just budding into manhood, — the Prince stood tall and straight before the King. Short curling hair, a rich dark brown, framed his handsome head; on his features a manly courage had set its stamp, from the shapely though well-squared chin and firm yet kindly lips to the straight, clear-cut nose and broad fair brow, beneath which the brave brown eyes looked wistfully into his father's.

“You shall start upon the morrow, if you will it,” said the King; then rising and passing his hand across his forehead, as though thus wiping away the last of his fears, he caught the Prince in his embrace: “May the elves that have so far befriended you keep steadfast in your service on the way.”

CHAPTER VII

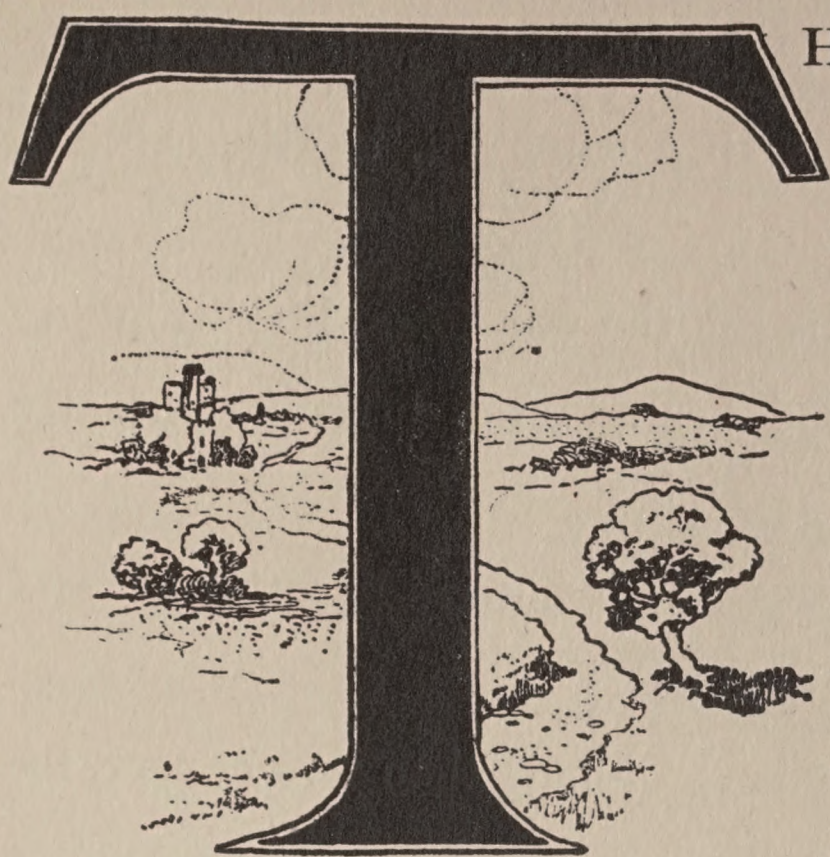


In·which·the·Prince
rides·forth·upon·
his·Quest·

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH

*In which the Prince rides forth upon
his Quest*





HE PRINCE WAS UP

betimes the following day, seeing to the grooming of Bayard, his barb, who whinnied him a joyous greeting as though anxious for the start, and getting the few things he was to carry on his journey properly placed behind the

saddle and in his wallet. He had elected to travel alone, without squire or serving man, and after farewells to the King and the hosts of friends assembled to say good-bye, he jogged slowly down the valley road, through splashes of cool shade and rifts of early golden sunshine, turning often in the saddle to watch the turrets and red roofs of his birthplace sink slowly into the waves of soft green foliage, as some fair island on an emerald sea.

Downy clouds sailed leisurely across a sky of quivering blue, a gentle breeze hummed softly through the scarcely moving branches from which a myriad of birds sang to the balmy air, while far away flocks of sheep and cattle, tiny in the distance, grazed peacefully upon the swelling pastureland. A

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mare, with frisking, timid colt beside, stood wide-eyed by the road and greeted Bayard as they came up, trotting abreast for a little.

“Whither away?” she hailed the war horse, little thinking the Prince could understand her and was listening intently to every word.

“On a quest for a Princess,” he whinnied in answer, “and a long jaunt at that, I’m thinking.”

“You are right,” she replied; “longer than you expect, for my friend the ground-hog, who lives just beyond the willows in the pasture yonder, and whose burrow leads down nearly to the roof of the green gnome’s dining-hall, from which he can hear every word spoken, told me that last night they were talking about your master.”

“Well, well! and what then?” neighed Bayard, much interested.

“This,” said the mare with the unction of a born gossip: “The little man the Prince freed from enchantment at the pool was Speeldig, the King of the Gnomes, a very genial, kind-hearted old gentleman, who had freed an elf from a split tree trunk, where he had been imprisoned by the fierce old witch Eluesa, whom they all hate so. This aroused her wrath, and at the first chance she changed the King into a

THE FACE IN THE POOL

frog. The King gave the Prince an apricot from his orchard, though just what magic properties it possessed the ground-hog was unable to learn; but, what is more to the point, all the gnomes and good fairies are grateful to the Prince and will help him all they can toward success. He will be guided unconsciously by them to achieve the adventures of the three enchanted castles, which he must do before he can find the means to pierce the forest that girdles the mountain where the Princess Astrella sits in her tower. I, for my part, hope he may win her. He is a comely youth."

"And a good master," added the charger gaily, nickering his adieus, as he left her gazing after them, with her colt gambolling in the road, mimicking the gallop of the Prince's mount.

For all of that day and the two following Prince Hardel kept the western road, passing through villages that nestled under the protection of the baron's castle perched high upon a neighboring crag, or by some peasant's cot set within a bower of willow, yew, and cypress. Fresh-cheeked farmer lasses served him milk in earthen bowls, or curds and oaten cakes baked in the ashes of their simple ovens, yet savoring sweeter to his sharpened appetite than capon in a silver dish. Now resting by the edge of a clear spring that, rippling from

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the rock, had formed a pool set like a silver amulet to mirror forth the sky and waving branches overhead, he turned his horse agaze, and, gathering berries, pressed out their juices till the clear depths of the pool were purpled, hoping once more to see the fair face of the maiden of his dreams. In vain. Yet still it mattered little. His eyes half closed, he conjured up at will what he had already seen, the soft sad eyes, the gracious form, the hand so fair and slender that lay upon the tiger's shoulder.

Thus riding on through drowsy noons, brisk mornings, and calm eventides, meeting few upon the road and never tarrying the night where he might be known, he came to the broad river that marked the boundary of his father's kingdom, and felt that his adventures had begun at last. The ferry boat, in charge of a wry-backed little man whose long, sinewy arms were of prodigious strength, had neither oars nor sail, but swung from a pulley over a huge rope that spanned the stream from side to side. Leading his steed into the craft, himself standing in the stern, the Prince watched the hunchback at his task. Placing both vigorous hands about the rope, he drew the barge swiftly through the foaming waters to the other shore.

"I thank your Highness," said the fellow, looking from

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the gold piece in his palm up at Hardel. His face was singularly old and wrinkled; his eyes, long narrow slits pointing downward toward his nose, were of a greenish yellow, cat-like, blazing with a hideously fascinating gleam, that made a shudder pass over the Prince as he realized that the boatman was not of the people of the world. "I thank you for your bounty," he continued in low-pitched, growling tones. "Here, with the passing of the river, you leave your own land behind, and come on strange places that you know not of, so I would proffer this advice as to the first of them: Some hours' ride from here, as you are casting about for a lodging over night, you will see built on a terrace near the way a fine large mansion. Velvet lawns are all about it, the shrubs and trees on which are clipped in quaint design of bird and beast. From out its doors the sound of lutes and sweet-singing voices pulse on the evening air, while from the windows fair maids and handsome knights will beckon you. But pass them by to take the first cow-path that branches from the road due south, and follow it till you find a charcoal-burner's hut half hidden by great trees, around whose homely porch a rose-vine clambers, bearing black flowers. Enter there to pass the night, fearing nothing and taking what chance befalls."

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So saying he turned abruptly, and, with a few pulls of his sinewy arms, was soon beyond earshot of any question the Prince might have cared to ask.

Musing on the curious appearance of the dwarf and his still more strange advice, Hardel rode slowly on into the deepening gloom, to come at last, just as the evening air was growing chill, to the mansion on the terrace, all as the ferryman had said. There stretched the lawn, smooth as a carpet, its surface dotted with the shrubs fantastically clipped to represent here a swan, a rooster, or a dog, while yonder elephants, a lion, and a wild boar seemed standing as at bay. The sweetest music trembled on the breeze, while from the windows, bright with many colored lights, fair figures beckoned him, and some, as he thought, even called to him by name. Bayard, weary with the day's long march, was for turning up the broad gravelled path, scenting good provender within; but the Prince, remembering suddenly the words of the boatman, though the music had nearly mastered his senses, reined him sharply back, and, spurring up the road, soon came to a narrow path winding into the maze of a wood.

Up this he went more slowly, dodging the low-hanging branches that threatened to sweep him from his seat, till,

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half hidden by the jealous trees, as he had been told, he came upon a low thatched cottage, round whose squat door a rose-vine grew with rank luxuriance, its coal-black blossoms freighting the air with a delicious fragrance. Dismounting, he approached and rapped briskly on the panel. Slow shuffling, as of heavy feet, sounded from within, a light shone beneath the sill, and the door opened, disclosing a thin old man, his kindly face illumined by the candle he held shaded with scooped fingers, his gray eyes peering uncertainly into the gathering dusk.

“Only a traveller, full weary, who would ask your hospitality for the night,” was the Prince’s greeting.

“And welcome to such as my poor hut and fare can provide,” replied the charcoal-burner, — for such he was, — indicating a lean-to in the rear where the Prince found a truss of hay, with oats and bedding in plenty for his horse. Then, when Hardel had seen to the comfort of his mount, the old man ushered him into the single room that formed the interior of the cottage, showed him the bed (a sack of straw) where he could lie, and spread upon the board cheese, goat’s milk, coarse black bread, beechnuts, and blackberries fresh gathered from the bushes that hedged the house about.

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“Such as it is, you are welcome,” he repeated, eyeing his guest with a kindly smile. “Were my dear daughter here to play the cup-bearer, you would have no cause for complaint.”

“Is she away, or, mayhap, dead?” the Prince asked sympathetically.

“Ah, no,” replied the old man gently. “It is a strange tale, and you, if you will, may hear it as you break your fast.” So saying, and drawing his stool to the rough table, though eating but sparingly of the food, he began the story of his daughter Alaryede.

CHAPTER VIII



Contains the Charcoal-
burner's Story of his
Daughter Alaryede.

CHAPTER THE EIGHTH

*Contains the Charcoal-burner's Story of his
Daughter Alaryede*





HER MOTHER DIED twelve years ago, when the lass was yet a child of five, leaving me lonely here, poor ignorant fellow that I am, to bring her up as best I might, which would have been but ill were not the maid exceeding bright both in mind and disposition. Sunny as a day in June, which golden month best matched her moods, singing she went about the household tasks that she soon took from off my hands, doing them far better than I, leaving me free to tend my charcoal fires in the wood. Being so much alone, she took to wandering about the lanes and through the fields, gathering here and there a flower or rare shrub to bring home with her and plant in a garden she had made about the place. One day, straying farther than was her wont, she came to where four roads met. In the centre of the cross thus formed there stood a sign-post with painted arms that showed the way. At its foot an old woman all in black lay huddled, apparently asleep or overcome with weariness.

“Alaryede, her kind heart touched, gently roused her,

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asking what she could do to aid. Searching beneath her cloak, the dame brought forth a small copper pannikin, motioning to have it filled at a spring hard by. She drank of it greedily, and thanking the girl, muttered that she had travelled far that day, and hungered. Alaryede at once produced her wallet and set her simple lunch before the woman, to which she applied herself ravenously, eating it all in huge mouthfuls gulped down with draughts from the water remaining in the copper dish, and wheezing grunts of satisfaction the while. When she had finished what lay in her lap she searched the wallet with bony fingers for the last few crumbs, leaving no morsel for her hostess.

“Considerably astonished at such selfishness, Alaryede, though she was herself quite hungry, smiled on her, and hoping she was refreshed, was about to go her way, when the old dame motioned her to tarry, croaking, “Something for nothing never made a good bargain,” and picking three black pebbles that lay at hand, dropped them into the copper cup, then handed it to the maid, saying :

“‘Plant these by your doorstep, and water them three times from this cup at midnight. There will grow from them a rose-tree that shall clamber about the porch, bearing black blooms of a most sweet scent, whose leaves, when baked



*Raising the salver, she bade him pledge
her in the goblet*

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within a cake, shall have the power of casting whoever eats of it into a dreamless sleep that lasts for hours. Yet one word more: Beware the fawn whose neck bears a golden collar.'

"She had barely ceased speaking when her face grew darker in hue, her hands became more claw-like, she shrank in size, and soon not the old dame but a raven of glossy black stood by the sign-post, watching Alaryede from beady eyes. With a caw that was half a chuckle, it rose on flapping wing, soaring above the highest pines, to dwindle, a mere speck in the distance and vanish from her wondering gaze.

"On her return Alaryede planted the stones and tended them as bidden, to see the rose-tree grow, even as it is now. Summer and Winter it blooms the same, and where a rose is plucked, another fills its place at once. A few more words, and I am done. Twelve months had rolled away, Autumn had spread her richest dyes, the Winter stripped the trees in turn of scarlet, gold, and brown, hanging the sky with drab and piling deep drifts about the cabin walls. Spring came again to break the icy fetters of the brook and coax the modest violet to raise its timid face up toward a sky of yet more tender blue, and Summer, thickening the

THE FACE IN THE POOL

forest with its wealth of leaves, stretching rich carpets — green, gold, crimson-purple, white, and mauve — over the meadows as far as the eye could reach. We had been very happy that year, Alaryede and I. She had grown more lovely day by day, the joy of her old father's heart, when, rambling in the fields, gathering a blossom here and there, as was her way, she paused at the edge of a tiny stream. She spread her luncheon on a flat-topped rock, watching, as she ate, the bright-winged insects skim its surface, the silver flash of fish leaping for their prey, and was lulled by the drowsy hum of bees gathering their Winter store busily through the warm noontide. So still she lay that a fawn which appeared from a copse of beech a stone's throw to the left, limping on one forefoot, approached quite close and paused to drink at the stream, not noticing her; then, turning, made his way back toward the trees. Seeing how lame he was, and hoping to capture him for a pet, she rose and started in pursuit. He quickened his pace when he saw her following, managing to keep just beyond her reach. Now he was almost hers, now with a greater effort widening the distance between them, till, almost before she was aware how far she had followed, she found herself in a strange place deep in the forest and surrounded by six odd-looking men garbed in green and

THE FACE IN THE POOL

yellow. One of them caught the fawn, who wore about his neck a slender chain of gold, unnoticed by her till then, in the eagerness of the chase. Dazed for the moment, she yet remembered what the crow-woman had said, and, darting back, would have fled, but was instantly seized by the nearest man, who, holding her firmly, indicated a gloomy castle that loomed gray through the distant leaves, motioning that she must go with them.

“Numb with terror, she nearly swooned, for well she knew that before her was the Castle of the Hundred Maidens, where a hideous crone held captive many sweet damsels, who kept the hundred magic wheels humming that spun her flax into gold.

“There she is to this day,” continued the charcoal-burner, and added in a broken voice, “there, no doubt, she will remain, toiling with the unhappy maids in the great vaulted room, at a task that never ends, from which none have ever escaped. Is she not dead to me?” He buried his face in his trembling hands. The candle guttered in its socket, and all was dark.

Not wishing to disturb the old man in his grief, the Prince rose softly, and groping his way to the corner where was the sack of straw, stretched himself out upon it, thinking

THE FACE IN THE POOL

of the tale just told and striving his best for sleep. How long he slept, he knew not. When he awoke, it was with the curious feeling that he had dreamed, but what, he could not recall. From the far corner of the room sounded the heavy breathing of the charcoal-burner, while through the window streamed a shaft of moonlight, which, falling on the rough-tiled floor, lay quivering, a pool of silver in the gloom. In its very centre stood the little man who had given him the apricot (it seemed an age ago), dressed as he had been then, even to the cap with long, slender peak hanging far down his back. He was stroking his beard and gazing on Hardel with musing benevolence.

“Would you like to rescue the charcoal-burner’s daughter?” he asked abruptly, as though resuming a conversation.

“I should indeed,” replied the Prince, so surprised that for a moment he could not speak, “and can you tell me how?”

“That is a simple matter,” said the gnome, “only requiring brains, courage, and the proper tools. When you rise in the morning you will find the charcoal-burner gone to the forest, after having spread a breakfast of milk and wheaten cakes upon the table for his guest. Eat of them heartily, for you will need all your strength; then go to the rose-bush, gather the largest blossom you can find, and chop it fine with your

THE FACE IN THE POOL

hunting-knife ; then mix it with flour from the cupboard, and kneading it with the milk left in the pitcher, round the mass nicely and bake it in the oven. The magic of the leaves will cause it to rise and become light and brown, so when it is done any one who sees it will long for a taste. But do not put it to your lips, tempting as it will look. Wrap it, instead, carefully in a napkin, and set it to cool on the window-sill. When you have watered and groomed your horse, put the cake in your wallet, and note the highest fir-tree in the sky line of forest. Ride straight to its base, where you will see a hare dash from its burrow among the roots. Follow it. All I can add is this : divide the cake among the archers, and take from the chief his silver-tipped arrows and bow of yew. Slay the unicorn and feed with his heart the beast-men at the draw-bridge. The silver-tipped arrows will overcome the power of the witch, and allow you to take for yourself what lies in the chest she sits upon."

The little old gentleman finished his advice at headlong speed, for as he spoke he was melting rapidly into the moonlight, from his feet up. Toward the last, no more than his head and wagging beard remained ; while at the final word, a few stray gray locks fluttered a moment in the air, then, mingling with the silver light, completely passed away.

CHAPTER IX



In which is told how it
fared with the Prince in
his first Adventure, the Castle
of the Hundred Maidens.

CHAPTER THE NINTH

*In which is told how it fared with the
Prince in his first Adventure, the
Castle of the Hundred Maidens*



IN THE MORNING THE PRINCE
awoke, to find the sunlight streaming where the
moon's rays had danced the night before,
and his host gone to his fires in the for-
est. Upon the table were the jug of
milk and the wheaten cakes, all as the
gnome had said.

His fast soon broken, he rose, and
gathering the largest sable flower, as he
had been told, chopped and mixed it with flour from a
large sack in the cupboard. Kneading it with the milk
he had been careful to save, he raked the embers to-
gether and placed the dough in the oven. It was baked
much more quickly than the Prince expected, for when
he ventured a peep he saw the heavy lump had changed
into a handsome gold-brown cake that would have been
a source of pride to the most skilful housewife. Taking
it out, he could scarcely refrain from picking at the mellow-
tinted crust, so flaky and delicious did it look; but, wrap-
ping it in the napkin with all speed, to overcome further
temptation, he placed it on the window-ledge and sought
the lean-to where Bayard was already impatiently calling
for his morning rub and fodder. When he had brushed his

THE FACE IN THE POOL

horse's satin coat until it shone again, and watched the good fellow eat and drink his fill, saddled and bridled he led him to where the cake lay, now cool, upon the sill. Placing it carefully in his wallet, he mounted, and, looking toward the forest, easily determined the tree Speeldig had indicated, a giant fir rearing a proud head high above its fellows.

Cantering gaily across the field, he came shortly to the tree, not far within the belt of tree-land, to see a hare, with velvet ears laid back upon her gray fur coat, slip nimbly from her burrow under a huge gnarled root. Winding in and out among the trunks and through the underbrush that laced them thickly, he had all he could do to keep her in sight, and was busily intent upon his task, avoiding the clutching branches as well as he might with eyes fixed upon her flying heels, when he was startled by a hoarse cry close by his side: "Out of the range! Keep out of the range!"

Reining his charger abruptly, he saw he had come to a glade where a half-dozen foresters had set up a hide painted with white and black circles, and, armed with long bows, were using it as a target for their cloth-yard shafts. A weird-looking crew they were, their faces showing none of

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the generous hues that tint with rosy health the cheeks of those who lead an out-door life, but being of sallow gray that shaded into a loathly green. Their eyes, red-rimmed and baggy, shone with a baleful lustre as they stared, gathered grimly about Hardel, who, concealing as best he might the horror with which they inspired him, had dismounted. All dressed alike in jerkin and hose of woodman fashion, cut from cloth marked with broad green and yellow stripes, they resembled one another even more closely in face and form than in their raiment. So near alike were they that one could not be distinguished from another. One of the band differed from the rest in that he had a baldric and horn of silver slung over his broad shoulder and athwart his arching chest.

“I am truly sorry to be the cause of interrupting your sport,” said the Prince, in a conciliatory tone, indicating the target in which a few arrows were already fixed, “and would join in the game, if I may.”

“And what will you wager on your skill?” inquired he of the baldric, who seemed the leader of the company.

“This cake,” replied Hardel, pulling it from his wallet and extending it to the archer, “against your silver horn.”

The forester looked long and eagerly at the dainty

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morsel, to be filled, as the Prince had hoped, by its magic properties, with a strong desire to taste. "It is a bargain," he growled; then, striding to the target, plucked out the arrows, and, returning, motioned to one of his men to shoot.

Placing his foot on the flat white rock that marked the distance, the fellow bent his long bow deliberately, placing his arrow well within the third black ring. The second fared no better, the third and fourth clipped the second ring, while the fifth shot well within the first. Amid a deep silence, the chief, stepping to the mark, carefully fitted his arrow on the cord, and bending the supple yew once and again, as though to feel his shot before the arrow sped, let loose his shaft with such marvellous skill and steady hand as to plant it quivering in the very centre of the bull's eye.

"A hit! a hit!" was the cry, as the chief, turning to where Hardel stood, proffered him his bow and an arrow with a mocking leer.

"I will not even try," said the Prince, smiling. "No man could better such a shot. The prize is fairly won."

Without a word, the archer, placing the cake on the flat white rock from which they had been shooting, drew his

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hunting-knife and divided it into six equal parts—one to each man; then squatting in a circle, they ate it to the last crumb. The Prince standing bridle in hand, watched with curious eyes, to see first one and then another stretch, yawn, and measure his length on the sword, till, overcome with heavy slumber, they all lay without the slightest motion of their powerful bodies, looking, with their greenish-gray faces, more like dead men than ever. Creeping softly near, the Prince knelt beside their leader, drawing his great bow of yew from his nerveless hand, and, unbuckling the quiver of silver-tipped arrows with the baldric and hunting-horn, slung them over his own shoulders.

Mounting his horse at a little distance from the ring of sleeping men, he was proceeding on his way when he noticed the hare in front, doubling and twisting as before. Spurring after, he was soon speeding on the chase again, when a loud snort and a wild trampling of brush caused him to draw aside suddenly, just as a great beast, in shape somewhat like to an enormous horse, came charging toward him with fiery eyes and foaming jaws. Its coat was rough and shaggy, and from its head projected a long, spiral horn, which just grazed Bayard's flank. Leaping nimbly from the saddle, the Prince placed his back to the nearest tree, drawing his sword as he

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did so, in time to see the monster wheel, scattering the leaves and stones like chaff, and return to the attack with the speed of a whirlwind, its lowered horn pointing straight as a lance at where he stood against the tree. Then did his skill in the tilt yard stand him in good stead, as leaping aside, he so parried the stroke, holding his sword-hilt with both hands and throwing the whole strength of arms and body into the effort, that the terrible thing swerved and buried its weapon half way to the skull in the tough wood of the oak, bellowing with rage till the forest rang to the echo. Swinging his blade, he struck blow upon blow in a gleaming swirl of steel at the heavy neck, till, parting from its hideous head, the huge body fell scuffling and striking to the ground, where, stiffening suddenly, it lay still, while the Prince, wiping the beads of terror from his brow, sank exhausted among the leaves.

Then, the words of the gnome coming clearly to his mind, he staggered to his feet, drew his poniard, cut out the still quivering heart, and dried it on the leaves and grass, to wrap it in the napkin in which the cake had been ; then slinging it from his saddle bow, he rode on in the direction from which the beast had come, the way clearly marked by snapped saplings and sod torn by furious hoofs. He had not gone

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far, and was wondering whether he should not have waited in the hope of once more seeing the hare he had hitherto followed, and whether he was on the right road, when he became aware of a low humming sound, and saw he was arrived at the edge of a broad moat, surrounding a castle of gray stone, from which the noise seemed to proceed. No flag or pennon waved on the battlements, no tree grew near the walls to relieve their cold, hard lines. Straight they rose from their foundations, without loophole or embrasure, enclosing a single large, round tower that rose above them, having four smaller ones projecting from it, one at each point of the compass, the whole bearing rather the appearance of a prison than the stronghold of a feudal chief. The draw-bridge was down, spanning the blackish water to its gate, at either side of which stood a figure of immense proportions, clad in complete armor, except as to the head; there the likeness to man ceased, for it was not the head of a human being, but of an animal. The one on the right bore the head of a lion; the other that of a wolf. Their fierce yellow eyes were fixed upon him with a frightful stare. Froth formed about their gnashing jaws and gleaming teeth. Plucking the unicorn's heart from out the napkin at his saddle, the Prince cleft it in two with a stroke of his dagger, urged his terrified

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steed at a hand-gallop across the bridge, throwing to each of the beasts a half as they rushed out to bear him down. Each caught the loathsome morsel in his teeth and paused to rend it. Spurring at top speed through the black archway, Hardel leaped from his saddle, and seizing the lever that worked the portcullis, threw his whole weight upon it, causing the heavy iron gate to fall between him and his pursuers with a clang.

Roaring and snarling in their rage, the beast-men hammered at the heavy barrier furiously, but for that the Prince cared not at all, knowing it could withstand an army if need were. Wrapping his cloak about his left arm as a shield, he drew his sword and plunged into the black entrance of the tower standing before him in the midst of the courtyard. Feeling his path with sword point and elbows the Prince made his way up a few winding steps to a massive iron-studded door. Thrusting with his shoulder against the thick oaken panel, he burst it open, and stood panting at one end of a huge vaulted hall lit by a thousand small round windows of orange-colored glass set high in the thick stone walls.

Ranged in rows on the rush-strewn floor stood a hundred spinning-wheels, whirling swiftly under the hands of as many

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maids, no one of whom glanced his way, so feverishly intent did they seem upon their task. Each girl had on one hand a heap of flax that, passing through the magic of the wheel, lay a gleaming mass of golden threads upon her other side. Great bales of the precious thread lay piled at one end of the vast hall, while in the centre rose a dais covered with a crimson cloth and bearing an enormous chest of silver. On this chest an old hag of most repulsive mien sat shaking her bony fists and screaming foul curses at the intruder. She was gowned in cloth of striped green and yellow, as the foresters were, a long yellow cloak lay thrown about her shoulders, a high peaked cap of green sat on the wagging head from which her matted gray hair hung half over wicked, steely eyes, and dropped in an uncouth mass upon her shoulders.

The Prince raised his blade to rush upon her, only to have it suddenly spring from his grasp and fall clattering to the flagstones, at a wave of the witch's arm. Then suddenly bethinking him of the bow and quiver at his back, he swiftly unslung them and fitted an arrow to the string. The hag, as she saw the silver-tipped shaft, gave a wild scream and rushed forward, mouthing in terror, to pluck it from him, only to fall shrieking and clawing among the rushes, shot through the heart.

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Instantly the loud humming ceased, and every wheel grew still. The maidens, rising stiffly from their stools, rubbed their eyes, shuddering as though waking from some hideous dream. Then seeing their enemy stretched rigid where she had fallen, and the Prince, bow in hand, standing near, some of them caught him by the hands, some threw their arms around his neck, he blushing hotly in embarrassment. So hailing him as their hero and deliverer, with tears of joy they led him to the silver chest, and taking hold of the lid, as many as could find hand room heaved up the heavy metal and bade him take what lay within. Stooping, Hardel drew forth first a sword of exquisite workmanship, the hilt set with precious stones that flashed in the orange light of the windows, and quaintly fashioned in likeness of a golden dragon's claw ; even the blade bore evidence of a master workman's touch, being inlaid with rare enamels in intricate and beautiful design half way to the point, but so heavy was it that it seemed almost useless. The only other object in the chest was a large silver goblet, richly embossed and bearing upon its side, traced in ancient symbols, this legend —

“ He that drynkes mee, be hym brave,
The strength of manye menne shal have,
The trenchant dragon sword to wave ” —

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The Prince, looking into the clear, sparkling liquid it contained, would have hesitated at drinking a strange mixture under such peculiar circumstances had he not in mind the advice of Speeldig, to "take what he should find in the witch's chest for his own"; so, fearlessly raising the cup to his lips, with a "by your leave, fair maids," he quaffed it to the last drop—to feel new life and energy course through his veins. His shoulders became of greater breadth, while his already powerful muscles grew still harder and of greater size. So, minded to try his new-found power, he grasped the heavy sword he could hardly lift before, and found he could toss it in the air as easily as a willow wand. He laughed in the joy of his strength and vigor.

"Now," said one of the maidens, stepping from the throng about him, "tell us of your adventures, Sir Knight, and how it befell that you chanced here to slay the witch and set us free."

So, seated on the silver chest, his new-won prize across his knees, a ring of happy faces and eager eyes about him, he told the tale as you have read it here. When he had done, the maiden who had spoken, a comely lass, advanced to him and taking his hand told him she was Alaryede, the charcoal-burner's daughter.

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"We all have earned it," she added to her companions, "so let us take each as much of the golden thread as she can carry, and wend our several ways back to our homes, for the Castle of the Hundred Maidens is no more."

They straightway did so, and when they all stood gathered in the courtyard, "Blow a blast on the silver horn that hangs at your side, Prince," said Alaryede, turning to Hardel, who, placing it to his lips, blew once and yet again a loud, clear note. The echo had barely ceased quivering in the distance when the massy walls of the tower commenced crumbling, and at another blast of the horn they faded away, leaving the company standing on a great gray rock in the midst of the forest. The Castle of the Hundred Maidens was, indeed, no more.

Coming to where his faithful steed was grazing hard by, the Prince swung to the saddle, helped Alaryede to a seat behind him, and bidding farewell to the joyous damsels, rode for the charcoal-burner's hut. Great was the good man's joy when the Prince restored his long-mourned daughter, and many the blessings he gave the black roses that clambered up the cottage wall. The father and daughter could not bear to part from the Prince, and pressed him to remain and rest a while, but he, feeling stronger than ever

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in his life, would not consent but for just that night. The morning saw him, the great sword of the dragon hilt by his side, cantering his black war-horse down the leafy lane, back to the road and his adventures; for none among the hundred maidens of the castle — not even Alaryede, passing fair though she was — had dimmed for an instant the image of Astrella that lay pictured on his steadfast heart.

CHAPTER X

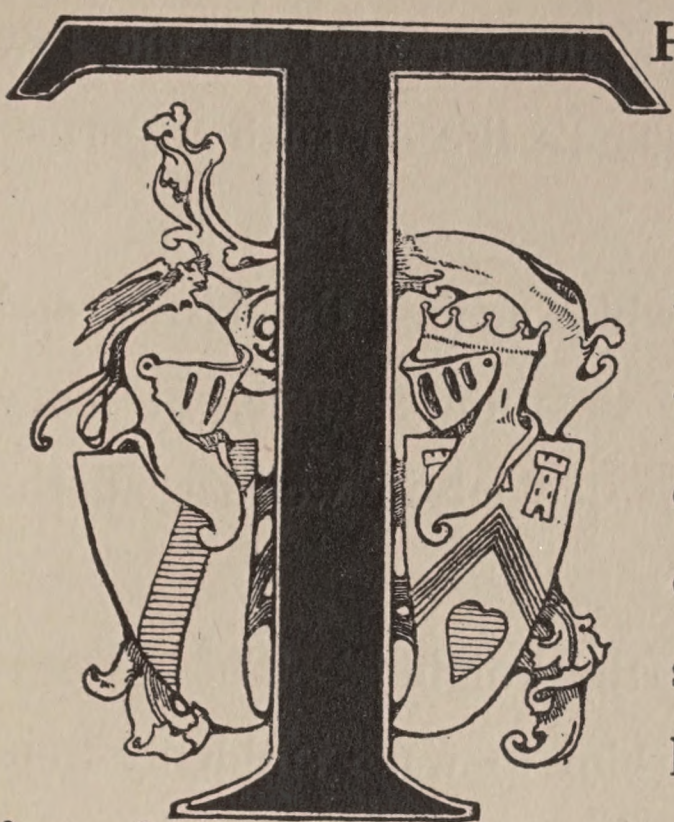


Wherein a Squire tells his
Tale, And the Knight of the
Red Lawns fights his last Battle.

CHAPTER THE TENTH

*Wherein a Squire tells his Tale, and the
Knight of the Red Lawns fights his
last Battle*





THE PRINCE, FARING
forth in the gay June weather,
felt himself one with all Nature
that morning. His triumphs of
the day before, the first real
deeds of importance that had
offered in his young life, now
seemed so strange he almost felt
he had dreamed and not per-
formed them; but there was the massive sword swaying at
his belt, its jewelled hilt a gleam in the early light, ringing a
tuneful assurance in time to the hoof-beats of his charger;
the generous blood coursing in his veins, and the added
vigor of his frame gave proof that he had not drained the
curious goblet with its quaint graven legend in vain.

So musing on these things, the verse wove subtly into
the rhythmic clang of trappings, to wrap him round in day
dreams. He saw again the hunting lodge and heard the
call of the mellow horn breathe soft as a sigh upon the
balmy air, as though from far a-down the dale; he heard
the sounds of hasting steeds, faint cries of many voices
borne faintly on the breeze, now near, then dwindling in
the distance till, mingling with soft brooding murmurs of

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rustling leaf and swaying bough, they melted in the low breathing that marks the woodland's life on such a perfect day.

Again the stag, a gleam of white against the brown and green, sprang from its covert; then once more, in fancy standing by the mystic pool, he looked in wonder at the bowing gnome.

“Speed fair the day, most worthy knight!” These words shouted in a clear treble caused him to wake suddenly from his musing, to find a youth in the green and gold of a squire's livery bowing by the side of a huge stump at the road edge, from which he had risen to greet him—a continuation in reality of the figment of his dream.

Drawing rein and answering courteously, the Prince inquired whither led the road, and why the youth should sit in such a lonely place, sad at heart; for he noticed a trace of recent tears in his frank gray eyes.

“If you will but alight and sit by me here,”—making room on the stump,—“you may hear my tale, though it is no long one, and learn of what lies before you, in the bargain.”

The Prince, swinging from the saddle, turned his barb to graze, then perching by the youth, his knee clasped in his

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hands, composed himself to listen, while the squire, after a few moments' hesitation, began his tale as follows:

“My father is warden of the gate at King Meliborn's palace, standing like a fortress on a high cliff overlooking a broad river that divides the kingdom from north to south, making fruitful the lands that border. Hamlet and village, pasture and farmstead cluster on its banks far as the eye can reach. Often I sat on one or other of the towers, a dizzy height, musing on where the stream came from, or of the people living in that far land, but more I longed to view the sea to which I knew it rolled to mingle its waters at the last. Was it then strange that when Prince Madrigan, whose squire I was, came and bade me prepare for a journey with him I was wild with joy? He had heard of the Tower where the Princess Astrella waited for the one who could set her free, and had determined to chance the venture—more, I think, from a wish to see a bit of the outside world than from any hope of success. A week from that day we set forth, the Prince on his roan charger, while I rode behind on a handsome gray he had given me some time before, proud as a peacock and bearing my master's shield and lance. We came after many days, though with little adventure, to Elgardane, where, after passing the night at the

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palace, we started for the mountain, clothed from its very foot in dense black forest, whereon is the Princess's prison tower. There is but one path leading into the thick growth, and this, we found, after a short journey into its depths, was barred by a tree growing in its centre, whose branches droop and coil in such manner as to make further progress impossible. The Prince took his battle-axe, and handing me his sword, we both started chopping the branches with might and main, — but all to no purpose, for as one was chopped, another formed in its place. Seeing by this the tree was of no ordinary fibre, Prince Madrigan ceased his efforts, and, peering through the branches, was aware of a middle-aged woman who sat on the other side and gazed at us curiously, but, as I thought, with no unfriendly mien. However, as she would answer none of the questions we put, we turned back wearily to seek our horses. Standing watching them as they nibbled at the short grass that fringed the forest was a very old woman who asked alms of my master. Giving her a piece of silver, he was about to ride away when she laid her bony hand on his stirrup.

“‘Most noble Prince,’ she said, in a high, cracked voice, ‘no common axe can cope with the branches of the magic tree, as I see by your flushed face you have no doubt dis-

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covered; but should you take to the western road, you would come to a grim old castle where dwells Kelmet the Wizard. Among the many strange things in his possession is a battle-axe of such peculiar virtue that whoso wields it his hand will never tire. Could you win this weapon from the wizard, I doubt not the tree might yet succumb,' and curtsying low, she hobbled rapidly away.

"The Prince, though having little faith in the words of the hag, yet determined to see the end of the matter, so we set forth, and after a few days came to that castle lying just beyond the turn of the road. Before it stretches a meadow covered with blood-red poppies in full bloom, and in its midst is set a fair pavilion of crimson cloth; a great oak is growing in front, on which hang many shields of different devices, and on a lower branch is hung a gong of brass. Among the leaves some apes leaped chattering and mouthing at us, while round about its trunk stood a number of cattle, sheep, and hogs, all gazing solemnly. My master no sooner caught sight of the brazen gong than he knew it was placed there by the knight in the pavilion, the glint of whose armor we could catch now and then in the shadow, as a challenge to battle, while the shields were those of the knights he had overcome. A sudden rage came over Madrigan that the knight should be so vulgar-

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proud. Turning, he took the spear and shield I carried, then lowering his visor, rode straight to the gong, in spite of the crowding cattle, and struck it a mighty blow with his lance's point. The echo had scarce died away when there emerged from the tent a knight of gigantic size, his armor all crimson, mounted on a great bay war-horse. After riding forward a few paces he came to a halt and cried in a loud deep voice, 'I am the Knight of the Red Lawns, guarding this castle and the poppy fields. Who are you that dare to beat upon my gong, as though to hurl it to the ground?' My Prince cried out his name and titles in return, whereat they both placed their lances in rest and met with a furious shock, the Prince breaking his lance full on his adversary's shield, only to be himself hurled from the saddle prone on the ground. And then occurred the strangest thing of all, and one to make the blood run cold: alighting, the one in red went to where Madrigan lay and tore open his coat of mail, from whence sprang an ape, who leaped gibbering into the tree, while the knight threw the empty armor over my master's saddle and led both horses away, first having hung the shield among the others on the tree, and cruelly mocked the ape that huddled in its branches. I knew now why the apes had mouthed and the animals gathered about the oak, as though to bar

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approach. They were the owners of the shields that hung upon it, bewitched and overcome, even as my master, trying in dumb fashion to warn us away. So when my trembling limbs would move, I fled unnoticed to this spot. The tears in my eyes, lord, are for the dear Prince Madrigan, whom I fear I never more shall see in his own fair shape."

The squire had barely finished speaking when, from the trees on either side, came the cattle, swine, sheep, and apes who, ranging themselves in a circle about the stump, gazed with sad eyes upon the pair.

"Speak," said the Prince, "and know that though to other human ears your voices may have no meaning, yet to me they are plain, for I can understand the language of the animals."

At these words there stepped from among his fellows a fine black bull, who, with a shake of his heavy head, addressed the Prince:

"Now that, indeed, is fortunate, for could I but have held converse with others ere they strove against him of the Red Lawns, many might have been spared, who, once noble knights, now form part of this doleful company. I, myself, was famous in the tourney, excelling all in arms, both on foot and on horseback, yet did my skill avail me not at all against the Crimson Knight. These you see about us, as gibbering

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ape or beast of the field, were all brave warriors, skilled in the art of battle, yet fallen one by one, myself the first victim, striving in vain to warn them of their fate, only to find my words turned to a bull's bellow in this thick neck ; but you, Prince, who can understand, I warn to turn your charger's head toward the place whence you came. Think it no disgrace nor lack of knightly courage, where so many good men have failed, and save your glorious youth and strength for some future field where the odds are not so great."

Hardel looked sadly round the circle. "I cannot do it," he said. "I could not bear to leave so many worthy gentlemen in such sorry plight. Why, the song of battle on my lips would sound a mockery in my ears. I should burn up with blushes in my shame, the very jingle of my armor would seem to mock me, no longer ringing of high deeds to do, but changed to the rattle of a coward's chain. The golden spurs of knighthood on my heels would be the symbols of a living lie. Not so," he added, with a generous flush, and rising, drew the great sword from its sheath. "I will avenge you if I may."

"It grieves me much, though I admire you for your noble words," replied the bull, "and as I see a man such as yourself will not be turned by any thought of fear, I give you what

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advice I can, for much I have discovered that may aid you, since, long ago, I was transformed to what you see me now. Know then, the shield he carries is bewitched. No lance may pierce it, but instead, on striking it is shattered at the touch. Aim then for the shield, fair and true, but swerve at the stroke and hit him elsewhere. As for the rest, why, it lies in your own good arm. Now should you chance to win him, ride to the drawbridge and shoot an arrow into the centre of the skull carved in the middle of the coat-of-arms above the archway piercing the castle wall. The gate will straightway open. Enter and pass the night in the great hall, fearing nothing, for to him who is without cowardice no harm can befall. In the morning will come the master of the castle, Kelmet the Wizard, a man of huge strength, terrible to see. He will wrestle with you in the courtyard, and should you contrive to overcome him, the magic battle-axe, which never tires the hand that wields it, will be yours. Then taking his hunting horn and filling it at the fountain in the yard, cast the water on us, to make us once more men! Right so we greet you, noble Prince, who may be going forth to what is worse than death, and we wish you courage, strength, and bright success!"

As they fell upon their knees there in the dusty road, the

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squire pressed his lips on the Prince's hand, for though he had not understood the words, the purport of the thing was plain.

Striding silently to where Bayard stood waiting, — for the horse had listened to the counsel and was ready to bear his share of the coming strife, — Hardel looked keenly to placing of girth and set of saddle, tightening a buckle here, there shifting a strap, making sure his sword hung ready to his hand, and testing the point of his lance against a tree ; then swinging his broad shield to his left arm, he mounted quietly and rode slowly down the road, while the beasts, feeling that should this champion fail their hope was lost indeed, followed dumbly after.

Coming to the poppied field, the Prince took a long look at the spot, judging the range, marking each slight hollow and bush ; then, riding at a gentle canter over the scarlet blossoms, he struck the gong smartly with his lance's point, and backing his war-horse gracefully a hundred paces to allow of greater distance for the charge, he shut his helmet with a click, and couching his lance, stood motionless, waiting. Nor had he long to stay till from the scarlet tent the huge Knight of the Red Lawns came, already mounted on his great bay charger, fully armed in crimsoned steel, saluting.

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“Who may you be that come unmannerly to beat upon my gong?”

“That’s as may be,” returned Prince Hardel, “though, rest assured, a better man than you who, fighting fair, yet means to be your death!”

No further word was spoken, but, placing his lance in rest, the Red Knight sprang to the attack. No touch of the spur was needed for Bayard, who, arching low his splendid neck, sprang forward at furious speed, meeting the enemy ere he had covered half the distance. The Prince meanwhile had made a show of aiming for his adversary’s shield, but just at the encounter he swung low in the saddle, swerving his aim so that the crimson lance passed over his left shoulder, while his own, avoiding the shield, struck fair and true upon the Red Knight’s helm, hurling him from his mount with awful force. A shock so violent would have been the end of any other man, but this one sprang from the hard earth as though from off a bed of down, and drawing his sword, dressed to meet the attack of the Prince, who, determined to spare no advantage, swung his steed in a half circle and rushed down upon him fiercely, seeking to pin him with his lance; but the Red One, leaping nimbly to one side, caught it a blow with his shield as it passed, shivering the good spear to fragments.

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Fearing for his horse, the Prince sprang from the saddle, and drawing his gleaming weapon of the dragon hilt, threw himself forward, dealing blow on blow, hewing the magic shield that had no power against this sword of swords, and finding each chink and rivet in the huge knight's armor with shrewdly cruel skill, till the scarlet mail grew yet more ruddy with the blood that followed each thrust and sweeping cut of the trusty blade. Round and round they circled, the Knight of the Lawns seeking with desperate might to beat through the Prince's guard, but wherever his sword fell, it ever met the parrying blade or heavy shield, while the challenger, far from showing weariness, seemed to wax stronger with every stroke that now he directed principally at the fastenings of the gorget, which, yielding at length, suffered the Red Knight's helm to be beaten from his head. Scarcely had it touched the ground ere the Prince, putting his whole lusty strength into the blow, struck with such frightful force that his sword, cleaving from crown to chin, shore half way down the scarlet breastplate ; there it rested, fixed so firmly that Hardel was forced to place his foot upon the prostrate form and use both hands to draw it forth.

Turning from the dreadful sight (for now that the lust of strife was over, the Prince could not bear to look upon his

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work), he swung his shield upon his back, and remounting Bayard, who had stood near the while, rode straight for the drawbridge of the castle. Fitting an arrow to the bow he had taken from the archer in green and yellow near the Castle of the Hundred Maidens and still kept slung to his saddle, the Prince sent it quivering to the very centre of the skull upon the coat-of-arms high above the great arch in the wall.

CHAPTER XI

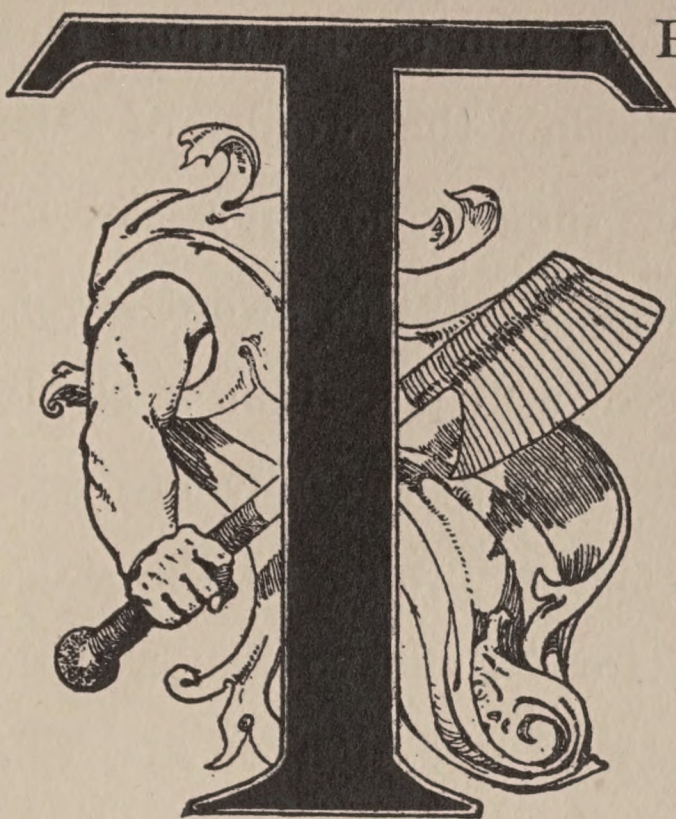


Relates how the Prince spent the Night at the Castle of Kelmet the Wizard though with but poor opinion of its hospitality.

CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH

*Relates how the Prince spent the Night at
the Castle of Kelmet the Wizard, though
with but poor Opinion of its Hospitality*





HE GATES SWUNG WIDE,
the huge portcullis rose slowly
on creaking chains, and with a
hollow clatter of hoofs over the
thick planking of the bridge,
the Prince passed beneath the
frowning battlements and halted,
his naked sword in hand,
within the courtyard of Kelmet
the Wizard.

A fountain having a wide basin of carved stone flashed in the centre, ivy wrapped the great towers that rose before him, their mullioned windows catching the last rays of the setting sun, gleaming orange through the clinging green. Rose-vine and clematis were trained along the wall, fruit-trees and shrubs grew in the angles, while a tessellated path of black marble and white led from the fountain to the steps that flanked the entrance. As the Prince sat his barb, noting these and many other things, he became aware of two huge negroes—naked but for a leopard skin about the loins, and adorned with earrings and armlets of gold inlaid with ivory—who had descended the castle stair and now stood on either side of him, mak-

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ing signs that they were to relieve him of his armor and attend to his horse. Remembering the words of the black bull by the road, that he should show no fear, he let them do as they wished, keeping only his sword at his side; then, having seen his steed well placed in a stable adjoining the main tower, his mail hung carefully on pegs by the stall, he left him there, and returning to the stairway went boldly in. He went from room to room, finding all richly furnished but empty of any sign of life, till, pushing aside the rich hangings of one, he found a dark-panelled door. Opening it, he stood at once in a great hall, brilliantly lighted with tall candles of green wax in silver stands, a table in the centre of the polished inlaid floor, around which a richly dressed company were supping. They turned toward him as he entered, and he saw, with a feeling of horror he instantly suppressed, that they were skeletons. There could be no doubt of it. Bony hands held the knives and forks, clattering as they touched goblet or plate; grinning skulls topped the rich silks and velvets of their habits,—except in the case of one who sat at the head, a man of gigantic proportions, dressed in dull black and red, with a cruel, narrow face of pasty hue, from which a pair of red-rimmed eyes looked menacingly into Hardel's.

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This person, none other than Kelmet the Wizard, as Hardel guessed, waved him to a vacant chair at the foot, on which the Prince, after making his bow to his host and the weird guests, sat down. Roast meats with bread and fruit on silver platters covered the board in plenty, and noticing that each helped himself, the newcomer followed suit, and was soon in the midst of a hearty meal, when, to his surprise, the others rose, and, taking the scraps and leavings from their several plates, began throwing them into his. Greatly angered at the insult, the Prince rose hotly, and, drawing his sword, prepared to defy them, when, with a horrid shriek, they leaped upon the table, which instantly sank through the floor, leaving only a flash of bluish flame and dense black smoke to mark the place where once it stood. These drifting away, the Prince found himself alone, and was about to examine more closely into his surroundings, when three men entered from the farther end of the hall. Their faces, the color of old mahogany, had something of its shine, in that the skin was drawn so tightly over the bones as to give the features the appearance of being carved; the eyes, small and narrow, glowed like live coals half buried in dark ashes; these with the teeth gleaming yellow-white between the

THE FACE IN THE POOL

black lips produced a most uncanny look. They were clothed in deep red jerkins and hose, fitting tightly to thin though agile forms. Two of them carried a set of ninepins and balls for bowling; the third, placing the pins in order at the end of the hall, stood by while the two others advanced toward where the Prince stood, without paying much heed to him, and commenced to roll, each chalking the score on the other's back with a bit of yellow crayon. Hardel, becoming much interested in the game, at which he was himself quite expert, stepped forward, in spite of the strangeness of his surroundings and the forbidding appearance of the players, and asked courteously if he might not join them. They stopped at once and looked upon him steadily, then the nearest, advancing without a word, proffered him the ball. He stretched forth his hand and took it, when it changed instantly, and to his horror, into a freshly severed human head which he was grasping by the matted locks, and the pins at which he was about to aim to thigh bones, placed on end. As he shrank back from the ghastly thing, all three of the devil-men rushed upon him, eyes flaming in dark faces, black lips baring the grinning yellow fangs, their lean hands and long, tigerish nails clutching for him.

THE FACE IN THE POOL

Springing back with a loud cry, he dashed the head full at the foremost, who, falling back upon his fellows, gave the Prince an instant in which to flash out his sword and charge; but the mighty blade went through the shapes as through smoke, and with a fiendish scream they vanished, leaving no trace.

Hardel, with a slight tremor which he quickly conquered, strode over to the fire blazing on the hearth at one side of the hall, sheathed his weapon, and seating himself on the settle, hoped fervently no more such visitors would appear. In this he was doomed to disappointment, for he had not been there long, staring into the cheering blaze and trying to conjure up the face of his Princess in the ruddy coals, to hearten him a little, when the curtains at the door were thrust violently aside and there entered five hideous hags. Four of them bore the headless figure of a man, one at each arm and one at each leg; the fifth was staggering under the weight of a large caldron of copper, which appeared to be half full of a liquid of some sort. Approaching the fire, she hung her burden on the crane and began stirring the contents slowly with a long iron ladle; the others, laying the body on the floor, where they propped it to a sitting posture, joined hands about the figure

THE FACE IN THE POOL

and began a curious hopping dance, weirdly fantastic, and actuated by a kind of demoniac vigor that was repulsively fascinating.

This had continued some time, during which no attention whatever was paid to Hardel, when one of them, spying the head into which the ball had been transformed, and which still lay on the polished floor, spun from the whirling circle and, seizing it eagerly, brought it to the fire-light, at which the five gathered closely about, chuckling and crooning in a fierce joy. Dragging up the body, the one who held the head placed it in position on the trunk; then she who stirred the caldron dipped out a ladleful of the boiling mixture, pouring it on the joining of neck and shoulders, at which they came together as though never apart. Prying open the set teeth with the handle of the ladle, she dipped it once more in the pot, and poured the contents down the throat, from which came instantly a guttural sound, while the heavy lids opened, disclosing staring, glassy eyes seemingly fixed in horror. Leaping to the mantelpiece, over which had been nailed a cluster of old swords in ornamental design, the hag wrenched one from its fastenings, and hastening to the figure—for though it moved it could hardly be called a man—she placed the

THE FACE IN THE POOL

weapon in its hand ; then all five taking hold heaved it up, where it stood reeling like one newly roused from a deep sleep. Pointing with skinny fingers and screaming shrilly, the hags half dragged, half shoved him toward Hardel, who, wide-eyed with horror, yet determined to brave it to the last, had risen and faced this thing of death.

Even as it swayed at him, its great arm with the half-rusted blade held aloft, a clear ringing cock-crow cleft the air ; when suddenly as the snuffing of a candle, witches, caldron, monster, and all vanished as if they had never been.

With a shuddering sigh, yet undaunted heart, the Prince looked about him in relief. Finding all silent, he wrapped himself closely in his cloak, then stretching at full length by the dying embers, his naked sword still in his grasp, was soon plunged in the troubled sleep of exhaustion. Waking with the feeling of some one gazing intently at him, as he had done once before in the charcoal-burner's cottage, he opened his eyes, not, as on that occasion, to meet the kindly ones of the gnome, but to encounter the fierce look of Kelmet the Wizard, who stood lowering above him. A mighty battle-axe lay cradled in his folded arms, a baldric and hunting-horn swung from his shoulders ; otherwise, he was as he had

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been the night before, garbed in the suit of dull black and red.

“Now rise!” he said in a rumbling voice, as of pealing thunder heard a great way off. “To you I concede the honor of trying your strength against mine in the courtyard here below. No trick of sword or targe can help you now; but breast to breast in wrestler’s grip I soon will show you what you are who dare to slay my knight and brave the demons of my castle!”

Turning on his heel, he made swiftly for the door, the Prince, who had expected this, following closely. Down the turning stairs they tramped and out of the grim archway into the dewy brightness of the early morning. Laying aside his baldric and battle-axe, the giant wizard, stripped to his shirt, through which the great muscles of his torso and arms showed plainly, waited impatiently while Hardel, propping his sword against the wall, did the like.

Both ready at length, they began circling each about the other, head thrust warily forward, elbows close at sides, hands half clenched, seeking an opening, one in the other’s guard, like two fierce hawks. A sudden spring, and Kelmet had the Prince about the shoulders with his left arm, the other pressed firmly against his neck, striving to force back the

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head, while Hardel, gripping the wizard about the middle, wound his left leg around his thighs, straining to bend him back or sideways. Shifting his hold suddenly to a lower grip, Kelmet feigned to yield, then, turning suddenly in the Prince's hold, sought to press him down by sheer might; but Hardel, sliding his right arm upward, caught him with the full strength of shoulder and forearm cleanly under the chin; then throwing the whole might of his back and loins into the leverage thus obtained, he brought the wizard violently to the ground. Squirming like an eel, so that not his broad shoulders but only one hip and side touched the ground, he drove his knee into Hardel's ribs with all his strength. So, rolling, heaving up to fall again, over and under, they panted and snarled like baited wolves, now one appearing to gain mastery, anon the other struggling to the top. Covered with dust and scraping their flesh on the hard stones of the yard, they strained on, when the Prince, hearing a cooing voice speak his name distinctly, glanced up for an instant, to find that it came from one of a pair of pigeons perched on the stone coping above. As he fought, he listened as best he might, and heard the bird continue to his mate:

“Yes, it is Prince Hardel who strives so gallantly. If he

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only knew that the water of the fountain there had power to change the wizard to a turtle, and could but make him touch it, all would be well, where all seems ill just now !”

The Prince upon this, getting the direction and distance fixed in his mind, gave way slightly each time the strife tended toward the basin, drawing and pushing his opponent till he, all unconscious of the nearness of the fatal water, and thinking the Prince was weakening, heaved at him mightily ; then Hardel, throwing himself backward, gripped the wizard's corded neck in the crook of his arm and dragged him, screaming wildly now that he saw his peril, under the clear water.

Instantly he found himself empty-handed, and that a huge turtle had fastened his beak on his leg, keeping the hold doggedly. But the Prince scrambled out, dripping, seized on a large stone near by, and, forcing the head of the transformed Kelmet to the flagstones, smashed it with one blow of the heavy rock. Then, his strength failing suddenly, he fell, completely overcome, by the side of his conquered foe.

How long he lay he could not tell. When he came to his senses it was to find the sun nearing the zenith, a monkey dashing water in his face, while ranged around the courtyard stood the animals he had met the day before. Aching in every joint and sinew from the strain he had undergone so

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recently, the Prince yet remembered his friends and their need ; getting dizzily to his feet he made his way to where Kelmet had laid his baldric, horn, and battle-axe, and taking the bugle, he filled it at the fountain and scattered the contents broadcast over the beasts now huddled close about.

CHAPTER XII



Of the meeting of the
Prince with the Venerable Man
on the Milk White Jennet.

CHAPTER THE TWELFTH

*Of the Meeting of the Prince with the Vener-
able Man on the Milk-White Jennet*





THE EFFECT WAS START-
ling, for scarcely had the spray
touched them, than in their
places stood a gallant company
indeed, men of the highest no-
bility, — Prince, Duke, and Earl,
with many simple knights. The
mouthing ape stood revealed a
handsome prince, the ebony-hued
bull a tall, broad-shouldered, courtly knight, the Duke of
Arskane, who long had been mourned as dead by his loving
vassals.

The squire here entered and, now weeping tears of joy,
fell upon his master's neck, while they all, embracing one
another in their happiness, turned as one man to Hardel;
but speech failed them, and noting plainly his embarrassment
at having to be thanked, they merely held out their hands,
leaving to his imagination the conveyance of those thoughts
words are all too weak to bear. Two days they abode
there in the castle, finding it well stocked with provision of
the best and furnished luxuriantly from cellar to turret
chamber with a weirdly exquisite taste; but no sign of
life could they discover anywhere about, though they

THE FACE IN THE POOL

searched carefully, finally concluding that the demons were fled or annihilated on the death of their chief, the Wizard Kelmet.

On the morning of the third day the Prince, fully armed and mounted on Bayard, with the great battle-axe, his latest trophy, swinging at his saddle bow, appeared among the restored noblemen as they stood playing at quoits in the courtyard. Despite their entreaties that he remain a little longer (for they were loath to let so dear a friend go from out their lives), he insisted on going at once, telling them he was now quite rested and eager to be following whither his heartstrings led, to where, the fates being kind as they had hitherto proven, he might at length claim the guerdon of his deeds.

So he rode forth, sped by many a fervent wish, followed by the whole party to the turn in the road, where he left them crying their last adieus with husky throats, his eyes dimmed by sudden moisture as he saw the last of the little company by whom he was so well beloved.

Upon the crest of the mountain, from which he could just see the castle he had left, he waved his hand once more as a parting salute to the scene of so much strife, terror, and happiness; this last, as it ever should be, far greater than



*He dashed swift and sure, straight at
the horrid head*

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the rest, in that it came from the doing of good to others and the crushing out of evil.

Down through the valley, past whispering wood and fallow land, now skirting a tiny lake, now beside a stream sparkling its merry way over the smiling pasture, he came at length to the edge of a denser forest than any he had seen that day. As he approached, from out a copse of cypress that jutted from its edge, there rushed a venerable man, clinging to the back of a milk-white jennet, closely pursued by three ill-favored fellows, also mounted and urging their horses at top speed, who seemed by their manner to be robbers. Judging they would soon come up with their prey, unless help were speedily lent, Hardel urged Bayard to a run, and shouting defiance, swooped down upon them with brandished lance, when, like many of their kind, having no stomach for encountering what might prove an equal tussle, they turned tail and fled. The old man, seeing rescue at hand, pulled up his jennet and was sending scream on scream of derision and rage after his flying enemies, as has many times proven the way of the weak suddenly championed by the strong. When he could think of nothing more to cry, or, more probably, was spent for lack of breath, he turned to Hardel, who had sat by calmly smiling; for

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indeed the old man made a comical appearance, huddled on his high-pommelled saddle of stamped Spanish leather, his attire — all of dark gray sendal, with facings of yellow velvet — in sad disarray from the hurried nature of the latter part of his journey, a tall peaked cap, round the lower half of which an ornamental design in cabalistic figures was embroidered with green and black thread, set jauntily over one ear, completing the picture.

“Now that was indeed well done,” he panted, regaining his voice somewhat. “See what a good thing it is to wear armor and ride a large horse. You did not even need to strike a blow, but I am grateful for all that and would show my thanks rather than speak them.” So saying, he descended from the jennet, and producing a black wand tipped with agate from some hidden pocket in his flowing robes, drew with it a circle on the grass, and said: “I am known as the Wise Man of Othalbane, and am travelling to my home, which lies over beyond the mountain there. I have just completed one of my yearly trips through the country hereabout, plying my art of divining, and have collected a large sum in gold and silver moneys. This was known to the men from whom you have but now rescued me, who, robbers that they are, would have taken my hard-earned pelf and left me

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lifeless, mayhap, on the road. But enough of that. See, I try my skill for you."

The circle he had drawn now began to smoke, presently to blaze with a thin blue flame, whereat the magician, drawing forth a number of ivory discs on each of which was graven a figure similar to those adorning his conical hat, cast them within the ring of fire, where they commenced to spin rapidly, shifting to different combinations, stopping for an instant, at intervals, while the Wise Man, gently swaying his wand over them, read their meaning to the Prince, in short, jerky sentences.

"You are a Prince of royal blood. Hardel is your name. You seek the Princess Astrella of Elgardane. To win her you must possess: The sword of the dragon hilt, the battle-axe of Kelmet, and the three golden apples from the fountain of Queen Leliore, the fay. The sword and axe you have, passing great perils to obtain them. The third is yet to be gained, though it lies before you on your path. I see a castle, and from its gates a woman passing fair comes bringing a goblet on a silver salver. The one who drinks thereof will turn to stone. Drink not, but throw the contents over her and conquer, if you may, what next appears; then ride to the garden within the gates and

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pluck the apples from the fountain. Then, if you make good your escape from that place, against those who would hinder you, all will be well."

Here the discs ceased from spinning, nor could they be made to move again, though the magician still swung his wand in the effort. "That is all the fates will reveal," he remarked, picking up the ivories and restoring them to his pouch, "yet still I may help you somewhat," and he held out, as he spoke, a small green bag tied with red cord. "In this are a score of small black peas that, should you scatter them on the ground when in sore need, will spring into warriors, fully armed in black harness, mounted on jet-black steeds, who will help you through. I myself would have used them just now, but they are useless unless scattered by a royal hand. Take them, then, with my thanks, and so speed you, fair Prince, to a happy ending."

Thrusting them into Hardel's grasp, he mounted hurriedly, galloping swiftly away as though to avoid any demur the Prince might make to accepting such a valuable gift.

CHAPTER XIII

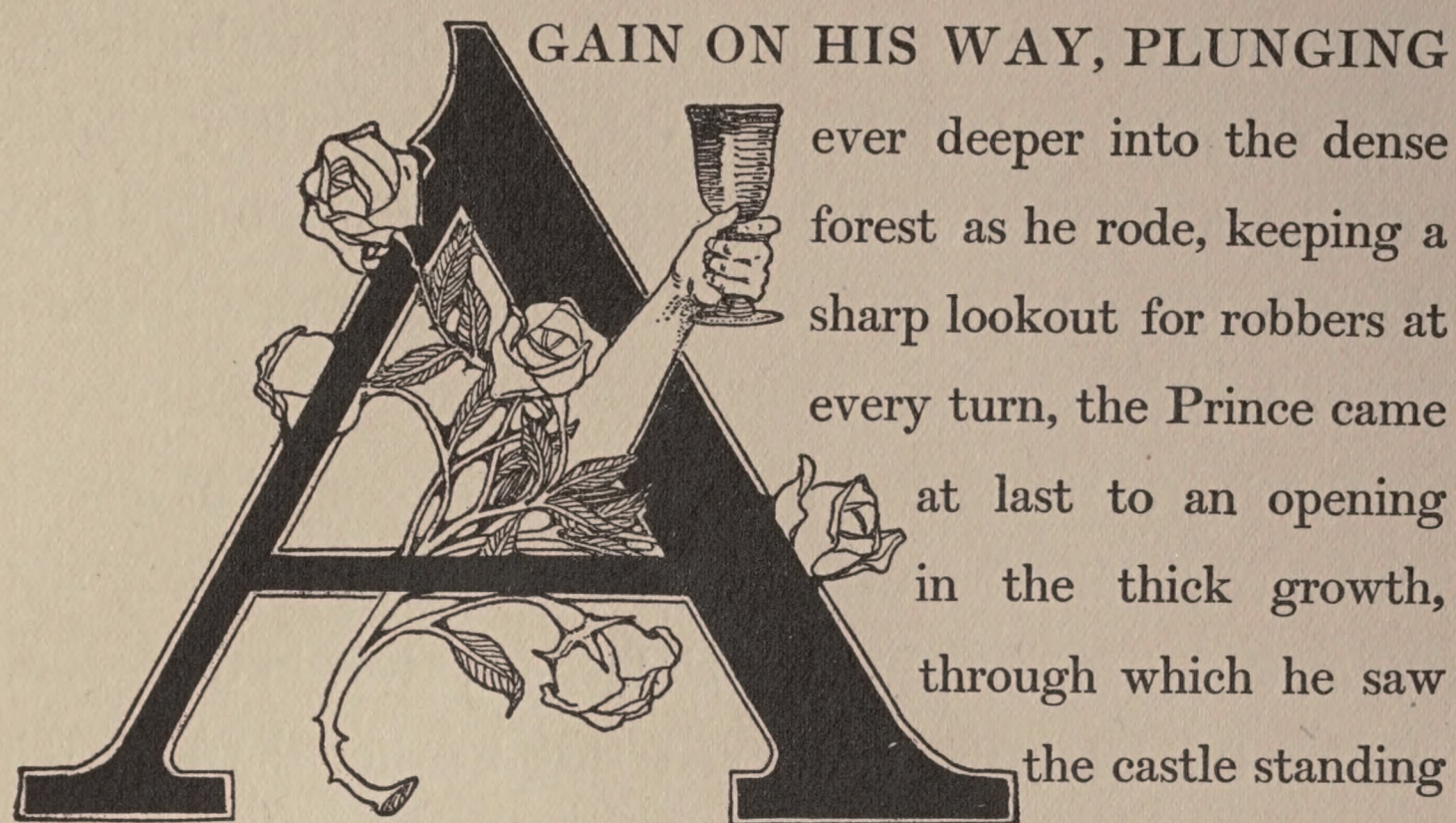


Containing the Adventures of the Prince at the Castle of Leliore the Fay.

CHAPTER THE THIRTEENTH

*Containing the Adventures of the Prince at
the Castle of Leliore the Fay*





ever deeper into the dense forest as he rode, keeping a sharp lookout for robbers at every turn, the Prince came at last to an opening in the thick growth, through which he saw the castle standing in the midst of a wide clear space among the giant trees. As he approached he noted that it was larger than that of the wizard, and much more beautiful, combining with the firm lines of a stronghold the grace of a palace; for while the outer walls and battlements were of stern gray stone, the inner towers and castle rose luminous in pure white marble, roofed in varicolored tiles. Through the wide gate could be caught a glimpse of a garden rich in gorgeous flowers and planted thick with trees of almond, pear, and apricot, a fountain plashing invitingly in the centre. But what most held his attention, claiming his admiration in their wonderful faithfulness to life in poise of figure and rendering of detail, was the number of statues abounding both within and without the walls. The warden of the gate, the sentinels upon the battle-

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ments, were all of the same pure marble as the inner buildings. Before the gate and all along the drive leading to it, a number of knights mounted on horseback, each in the act of drinking from a goblet, and carved from the same snowy stone, were placed.

Coming to the first of these, the Prince could but marvel at the wonderful workmanship. Every hair on the body and tail of the horse was perfect, each link and rivet in the armor, the hand holding the bridle and that bearing the cup, the strain of the neck muscles and the expression of the face in drinking were caught to the minutest detail. No sculptor could have produced the like, and he warmed with gratitude as he thought of the warning of the Wise Man that would save him from a like fate, it being plain they had all been changed to the cold stone directly the liquid in the cup had touched their lips.

Passing in and out among them, he perceived a lady, clad in scarlet silk half concealed by a rich cloak of purple velvet lined with ermine, caught at the collar with silver clasps, a crown thickly studded with gems nestling on her dark hair, and bearing in her hands a silver salver supporting a cup of gold, approaching along the drive. As she drew near, he saw she was indeed lovely to look upon, of tall and gracious

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form, though with a certain indefinable something of cruelty shining from her liquid eyes and lingering about the rich red lips half parted in a smile of welcome, disclosing teeth of creamy whiteness. Raising the salver in both fair hands, as the Prince sat silently observing her, she bade him, in a silvery voice, to pledge her in the goblet, an earnest of the cheer awaiting him beyond the gates. Taking the cup with a slight bow in salutation, he lifted it as if about to comply, then suddenly dashed the liquid full in her smiling, eager face.

A fierce scream, half human, half brutish, was the result, and where an instant before had stood the beautiful, smiling enchantress, now crouched, as if about to spring, a lithe black panther, its tail lashing from side to side, with sinister yellow eyes blazing full at him with fury. He had barely time to seize his battle-axe when the enraged brute rose in a clean bound straight at him, while he, stooping in the saddle, struck upward at the flying mass, but so hurriedly that the keen edge of the weapon merely grazed its flank, causing a tuft of the fur to spin into the air like black thistledown. Almost before he could turn his charger, the panther struck and, gathering instantly, leaped again, this time to receive the heavy weapon as it swung with the full force of the wheeling steed and circling arm of Hardel, full between the eyes.

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The stroke was so swiftly sure that the great cat fell without a sound, and with a few convulsive twitchings of sable limbs, lay still, cleft to the shoulders, leaving no sign of the lovely Queen but the golden goblet lying glittering among the grasses at the roadside.

The Prince sat dazed for a moment at the suddenness of it all ; then thinking perhaps it were best to act quickly, made at a hand-gallop for the drawbridge, his streaming axe still clenched in his hand. Clattering over, he drew rein among the fruit trees and glowing flowers at the edge of the fountain, a beautiful thing worthy of its exquisite surroundings. The base was of black marble supporting an onyx globe upon which stood the figures of three graceful youths fashioned in pure gold, and standing in a perfect triangle, back to back, holding with their left arms to a bronze dolphin that formed the centre ; a stream of crystal water spouted from its mouth to fall again in fine spray about the figures, each of which held extended in the grasp of its right hand a gleaming golden apple. These the Prince, finding he could just reach by standing on his horse's back, quickly gathered, but scarcely had he plucked the third and last when a great change took place about him. The castle that had seemed so empty was filled with the sound of hurrying feet, and

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hoarse orders were shouted through the din. Mailed heads thrust out, glaring down upon him from every window. The warden at the gate, the men-at-arms along the battlements (who had been marble as well as the knights that lined the road without), all sprang to life once more, these latter completely blocking the escape.

The Prince, seeing himself likely to be overpowered by sheer force of numbers, seized the tiny bag the Wise Man had given him, and, tearing the red cord from it with his left hand and teeth, scattered the black peas broadcast; then, setting his lance in rest, he charged swift as an eagle's swoop, shield and body lying low to saddle, and the mighty battle-axe of Kelmet swinging from its steel chain at his wrist.

Piercing clear through the shield and breastplate of the first knight, the spear broke short off near the grip, which Hardel hurled straight to the helm of the next, who, reeling from the saddle, was trampled beneath the heavy hoofs of his own charger. Pursuing his advantage, the Prince caught the haft of the great axe as it swung to his hand, and whirling it high, brought it down hissing on the gorget of the third whose sword was at his throat, so that the man's head spun from the shoulders, bounding, a ball of iron among his enemies. Again and again the great axe rose to fall, its keen edge

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undulled, biting through targe and corselet, morion and linked mail coat alike, never swerving or waxing heavy in his hand; yet even so, the issue hung in the balance, as instantly a foe went down before the fury of his arm, another sprang to fill the gap, while from the castle men completely armed, shouting hoarse battle cries, rushed to join the fray.

But the tide was turned suddenly in his favor by the black peas he had scattered from the small green sack. These had no sooner touched the ground than in their place appeared the twenty men in sable armor, mounted on their black steeds. Uttering no sound, silently they swung into the press, dealing such fearful blows with sword or mace and seconding Hardel so skilfully that in a little, the pass growing easier, the Prince, with a last charge and swing of his gleaming axe, beat down the few that still opposed, to thunder over the bridge and gain the forest road just beyond, followed by his twenty black-mailed henchmen. Nor did they draw rein till, the wood left far behind, they halted in a quiet valley some leagues away.

Hardel here turned, and facing them as they drew up in military order, each sitting motionless in his proper place, spoke words of praise and heartfelt thanks, to which they listened mutely. As he ceased speaking, one of the com-

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pany drawing the little green bag from his gauntlet cast it before him on the turf, at which the knight at the extreme left rode up till he stood over the spot whereon it lay, and saluting the Prince with drawn sword, instantly vanished. The next in line did the like, and so on, till only the one who had thrown down the bag remained; then he, dismounting, picked it up, and handing it to Hardel, disappeared immediately it was in the Prince's grasp, leaving him amazed, to peer into the sack and find the twenty small black peas lying innocently in it, as before.

Long he sat his saddle, musing; man and horse motionless as those others that such a short space before had lined the castle drive, save as Bayard pricked ear at some soft sound from out the girdling wood, or the plume upon his master's casque nodded in gentle answer to the questioning breeze. The mellow sun crept softly down behind the wall of green, peeping in golden glances through dainty tracery of bough and leaf, sending the stealthy shadow ever longer, mounting ever higher, till but the top of the tallest tree remained bathed in yellow glow against the deepening sky, a golden finger-tip beckoning the twilight's maiden kiss before, rousing somewhat from his dreaming, he looked about him. Finding the night so near at hand, he

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determined to spend it where he was; so, leading the patient barb to where a giant oak spread sheltering branches low above the velvet turf, he freed him from saddle and bit to roll and feast upon the green.

The crescent moon rose high above, wrapping the little glade in a mystery of silver, green, and purple, and still the Prince lay wakeful, thinking of the dangers he had passed and those that might yet stretch across his path. The memory of his vision of Astrella was weaving a golden thread of hope and courage in the fabric of his reverie, when a high, bell-like voice speaking his name brought him to with a start, to see bowing low, not three paces distant, the little man of the pool, Speeldig, King of the Gnomes.

“You have won the three castles, fairly and knightly as I had hoped,” he said, smiling; “so here I am come to offer my congratulations, and, mayhap, cheer you on your way. The goal of your ambition lies but a little way from here, for even now you are over the border of the kingdom of Elgardane; and in the morning, when you come from out this wood, you will see the early sunlight flush the palace walls. Many the fair prince and noble lord who has striven to gain the lady of your heart since first you took the lance and rode in her behalf, but all have gone crest-

THE FACE IN THE POOL

fallen from the task. I look to see you win, who have not failed in aught as yet, though sorely tried, and in the trial have gleaned the things most needed. Look you: there is a magic tree, then a barrier of smooth shining stone, and last there is a dragon to be overcome ere you may chance upon the Princess's smile. The battle-axe of Kelmet may help you with the tree. Hold fast the golden apples, for by their aid only may you pass the stone. Next comes the dragon; oppose to him your courage and the good sword from the castle of the Hundred Maidens; then, so you be fair to the eyes you fain would please, why, speed you well, Sir Prince!"

As the little man finished speaking his coat of green and gold and his scarlet hose lost color quickly, his face and figure turned quite of a silvery sheen, and mingling with the moonlight in which he stood, grew ever vaguer in their outlines, till suddenly they were no more, leaving the Prince, much heartened by the kind words of the tiny man, to turn upon one side, and, pillowing his head on the saddle, soon to plunge into a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER XIV



And last; relates how a
Shepherd-lad learned a
new Tune & the Princess to
smile again.

CHAPTER THE FOURTEENTH

*And last; relates how a Shepherd-lad learned
a new Tune, and the Princess to smile
again*





HE SUN HAD SCARCELY sped an hour on its way when a peasant lad, tending his flock upon a sunny slope above the plain where stretched Elgardane town yet half a-drowse, ceased suddenly from breathing a simple shepherd lay into his oaten pipe, to gaze with mouth agape as a figure in gleaming armor, astride a noble steed, came at half gallop from out the wood. Drawing rein on reaching the brow of the hill, the cavalier gazed long at the town and palace nestling in the valley far beneath, then bent his brows to where but just beyond a mountain rose, covered with dense black forest, upon whose very topmost crag a dull gray tower drew sharp against the turquoise sky.

The morning air was crystal clear, and from the turret window shone a tiny speck of gold. The shepherd saw the knight's strong hand grip fiercely at his saddle bow, while a warm flush spread from chin to brow; then from his curving lips there leaped a battle chant, wild, clear, and joyful, as, drawing his great sword, he galloped down the steep path,

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tossing high the heavy glaive and catching it as he went, as though it were a plaything and a mere feather-weight.

Gathering his scattered flock, the herd-boy sat him down and fell to practising upon his reed the warrior's song; yet scarcely had he mastered it, smothering its challenge in a minor key, when far across the valley, at the foot of the black mountain, the Princess Astrella, seated in her accustomed spot near the magic tree, heard ring of steel and the rhythm of beating hoofs swiftly approaching along the forest path. Peering through the branches, she saw that same knight, his handsome head held high, and the song the shepherd strove to pipe still coming from his lips. Arrived at the tree that barred his farther progress, he swung lightly to the ground, and stood considering it, fondling a huge battle-axe he carried across his arm. He had poised the weapon for the first blow, when noting Astrella, changed as she always was after passing the stream of pitch and the enchanted rock, he spoke kindly to her, thinking her some old dame who might chance to help him with advice as to the tree; so, leaning against a heavy branch, he began:

“Goodwife, in me you see one who has travelled many miles from a far distant country, one of whose dearest wishes is to sit as you do upon the other side of this same

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churlish tree. You who have passed it, as you must have done to be where I now see you, will not begrudge the telling of the trick?" He smiled down on her, wistfully waiting his answer. He spoke again, reminding her of the distance he had come and of his eagerness to be upon his way, but to no purpose, for though she looked at him with gentle, kindly eyes, no word would pass her lips. "Ah well!" he sighed at length, finding all persuasion useless, "'t is a knave at best who on another his task would rest," and swinging his great axe, he began with eager stroke, causing the broad chips to fly and the gnarled branches to groan and quiver beneath the mighty blows he rained upon them.

The Princess, watching from where she sat, noted the handsome face with firm set mouth, and eyes shining brightly with unflinching will, the dark locks clustering damp on the fair brow, each sweep and curve of broad shoulders and graceful limbs, the very poetry of manly force in action. She thought it ill indeed that one who wrought so cheerfully should spend his strength in vain, and she pitied him. So, looking yet again upon his winsome grace, his olive cheek flushed with high resolve, the long dark lashes that veiled the conquering light glowing in his clear brown eyes, she knew he was the one for whose

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coming she had waited so many weary days. Filled with the certainty that already she loved him well, she felt the warm blood go pounding through her veins, as springing to her feet she pronounced the word having power over the enchanted tree, which she alone could utter, and turning, sped up the path past stone and stream, to throw herself trembling upon her bed in the tower, and bury her face, crimsoned with blushes, deep among the pillows.

Meanwhile the Prince, striving undaunted, found that there no longer grew a fresh bough for every one he lopped, and that he wrought progress slowly. Greatly encouraged, he redoubled his efforts and soon had cleared a space large enough to lead Bayard through. This he did, and donning mailed coat and helm, which he had laid aside in preparation for his struggle with the tree, rode forward, every sense on the alert, till the smooth rock rose high before him in the path. After reading the carving on its smooth side, "The Princess may pass, and so may the Prince, if—" and seeing the three apples sculptured in a row, Hardel drew from his scrip the golden apples, and casting the first one over, saw with delight the rock sink several feet; at the second it lowered much more; then throwing the third, he saw the rampart sink level with the ground.

Cantering gaily over, his heart beating loud with joy, he

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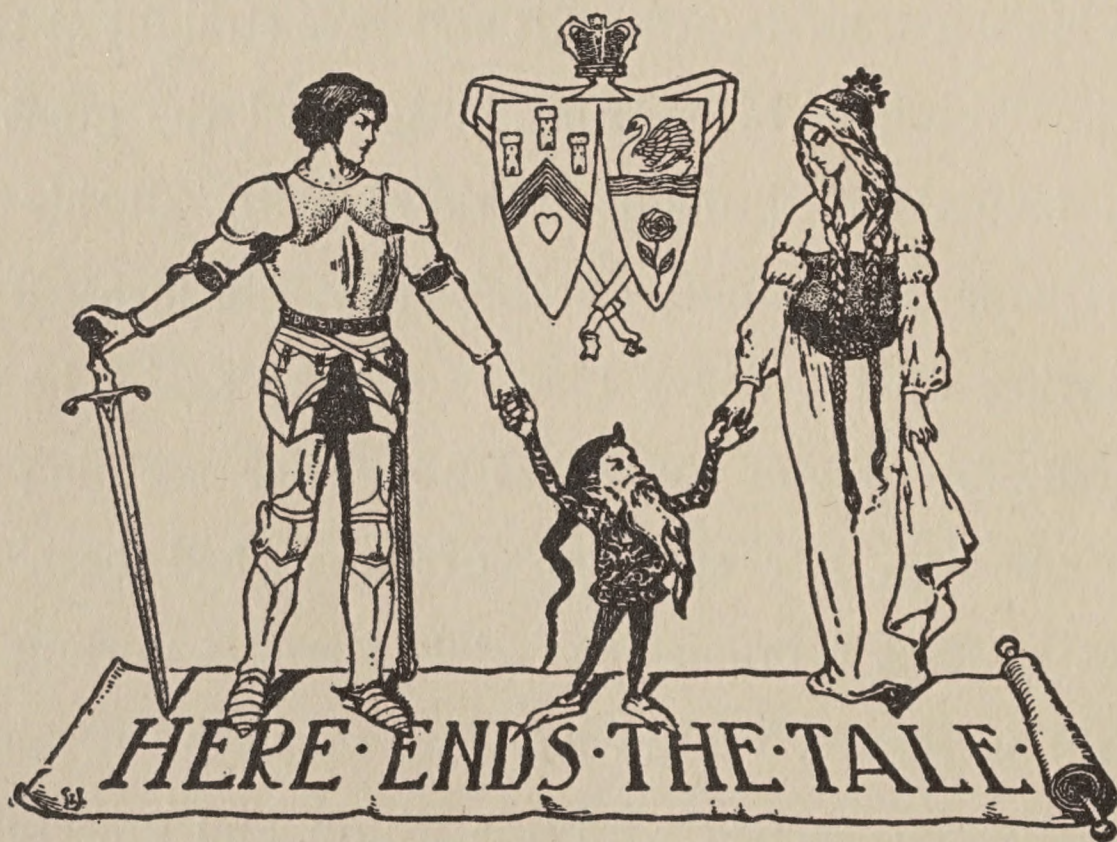
closed his visor, and drew his sword as he rode swiftly up the narrow way. Soon he came to where the stream of seething pitch bubbled across the road, sending its biting fumes and black, stinging smoke swirling full in his face, choking his breath and bringing the water to his smarting eyes.

High in the centre of the reeking vapors heaved the frightful head of the dragon, gnashing his huge jaws and breathing flame and deadly venom-laden air from his cavernous mouth and quivering nostrils, while sitting on his shoulders the witch Eluesa, her green eyes wild with rage, flecks of foam about her lips, urged him on, cursing and screaming fierce defiance at the Prince.

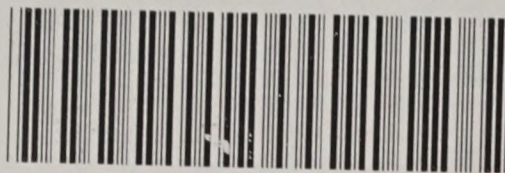
All this Hardel included in a single glance, then, setting spurs to his steed, he dashed swift and sure straight at the horrid head. Rising in his stirrups, he grasped the great sword in both hands and brought it down with all his might, through flame and smoke, on the slimy, green-scaled neck; then heaving up the heavy blade to strike again, he paused bewildered, for dragon there was none, nor seething pitchy stream, nor hag, nor anything of what had been before. There at his feet a brook of crystal clearness, purling among the sparkling stones, wound babbling on between fair banks of emerald green, shaded with soft willow and graceful birch.

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All the black wood had vanished, leaving no trace, and in its stead stretched velvet lawns with stately oak and poplar casting long, slender, purpling shadows. For the sun, an orb of throbbing light, had set his chin among the westering hills, lending his gold with spendthrift hand, to make the world more fair to speed his parting. The flowers cast their choicest fragrance on the breeze, as incense to the passing of their lord ; a thrush from out a bush of myrtle close at hand burst on the brooding stillness with a run of silver notes, and, as its song pulsed once again upon the quiet, fragrant air, he saw his Princess against a sky of gold and amethyst, her sweet face turned to his, her arms outstretched, the light of a great love shining from her dear eyes for him alone.



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